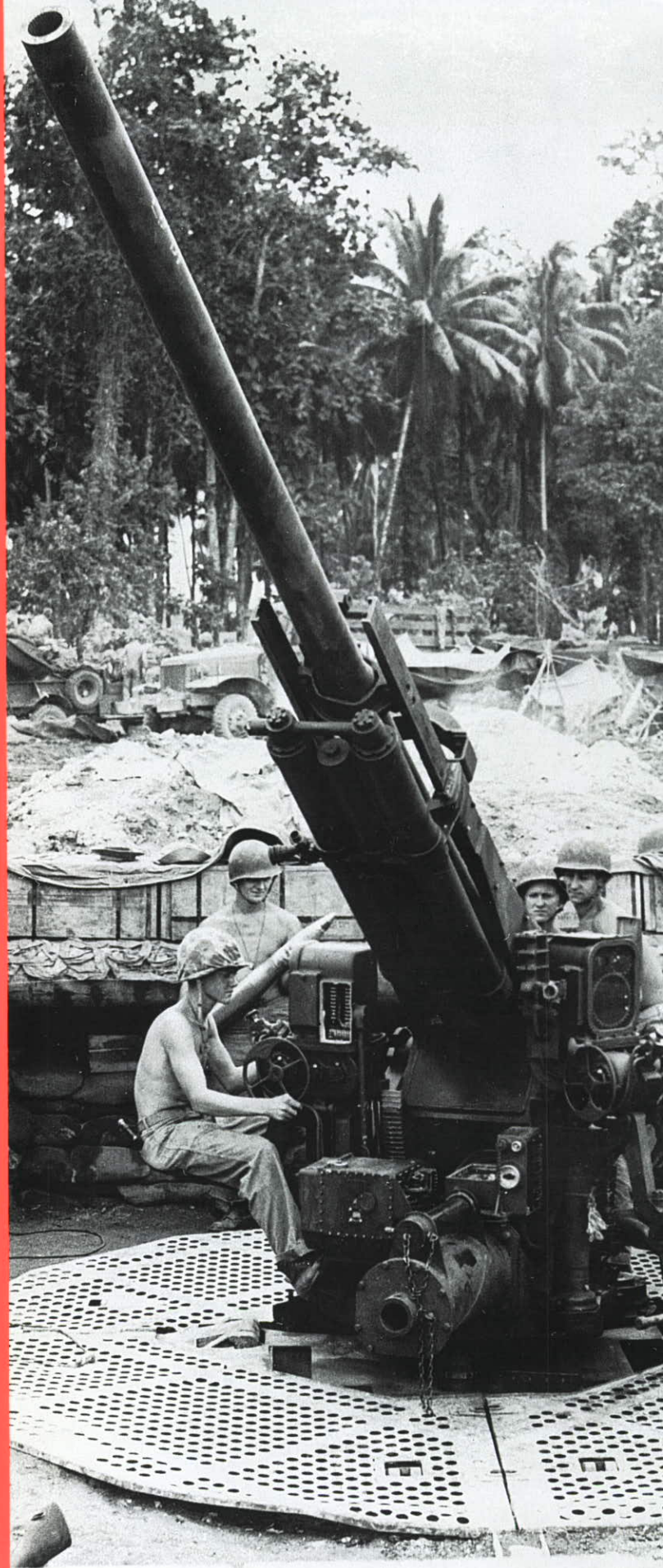
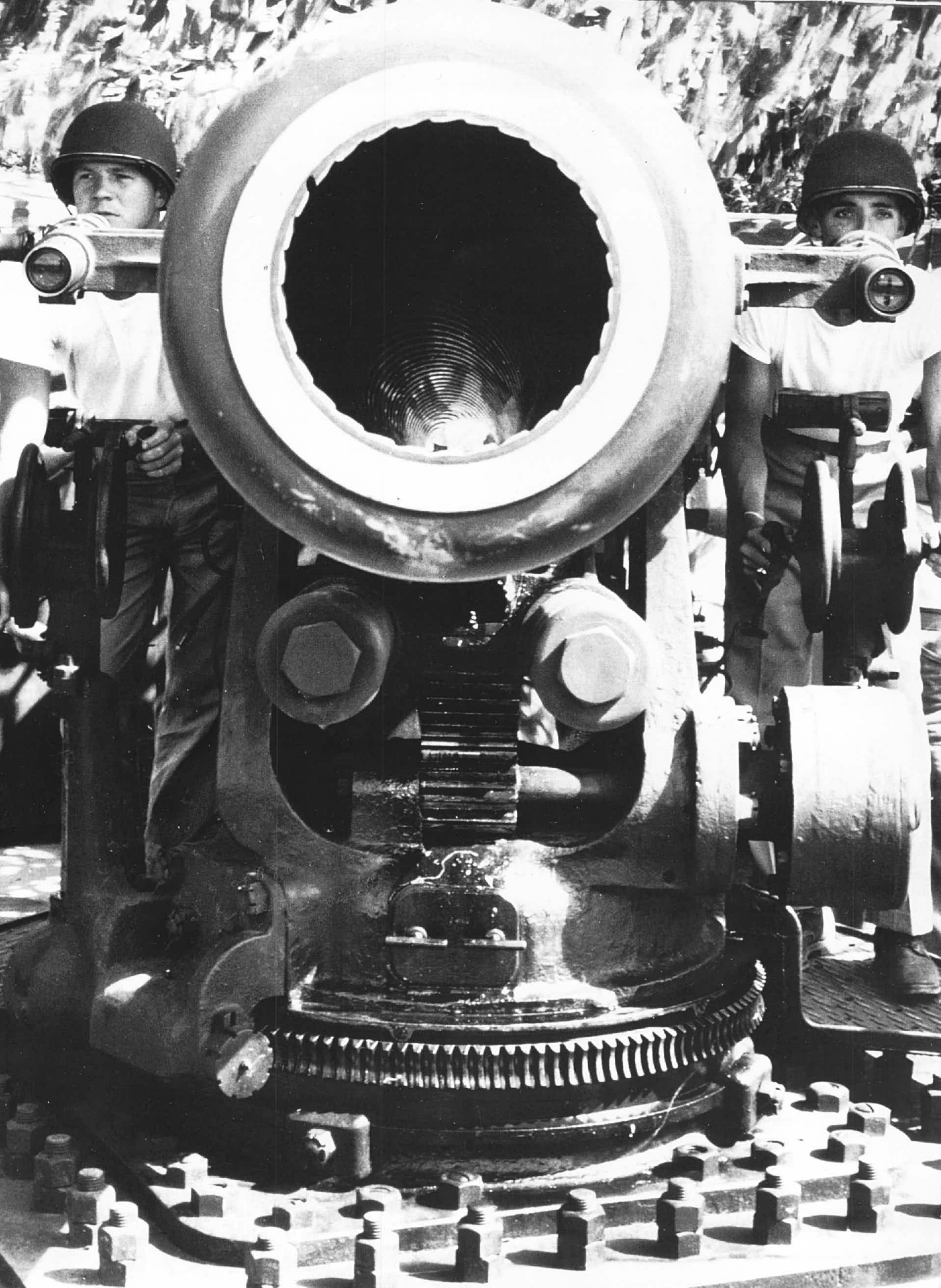


CONDITION RED: MARINE DEFENSE BATTALIONS IN WORLD WAR II

MARINES IN
WORLD WAR II
COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

BY MAJOR CHARLES D. MELSON
U.S. MARINE CORPS (RET)





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Japan, its military leaders confident they could stagger the United States and gain time to seize the oil and other natural resources necessary to dominate the western Pacific, attacked Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, sinking or badly damaging 18 ships, destroying some 200 aircraft, and killing more than 2,300 American servicemen. Though caught by surprise, Marines of the 1st, 3d, and 4th Defense Battalions standing guard in Hawaii fought back as best they could. Few heavy weapons were yet in place, and ammunition remained stored on shipboard, along with many of the guns. Nevertheless, these units had eight anti-aircraft machine guns in action within six minutes after the first bombs exploded at 0755. By 0820, 13 machine guns were manned and ready, and they cut loose when a second wave of Japanese aircraft began its attack a few minutes later. Unfortunately, shells for the 3-inch anti-aircraft guns did not reach the hurriedly deployed firing batteries until after the second and final wave of attacking aircraft had completed its deadly work. The Marines responded to the surprise raid with small arms and an eventual total of 25 machine guns, claiming the des-

truction of three aircraft during the morning's fighting.

As the Japanese aircraft carriers withdrew after the raid on Pearl Harbor, a pair of enemy destroyers began shelling Midway Island shortly before midnight on 7 December to neutralize the aircraft based there. A salvo directed against Midway's Sand Island struck the power plant, which served as the command post of the 6th Defense Battalion, grievously wounding First Lieutenant George H. Cannon. He remained at his post until the other Marines wounded by the same shell could be cared for and his communications specialist, Corporal Harold Hazelwood, had put the battalion switchboard back into action. Cannon, who died of his wounds, earned the first Medal of Honor awarded a Marine officer during World War II. Hazelwood received a Navy Cross.

Base Defense in a Possible War with Japan

For decades before Japan gambled its future on a war with the United States, the Marine Corps developed the doctrine, equipment, and organization needed for just such a conflict. Although the Army provided troops for the defense of the Philippines, the westernmost American possession in the Pacific, the Marine Corps faced two formidable challenges: placing garrisons on any of the smaller possessions that the Navy might use as bases at the onset of war; and seizing and defending the additional naval bases that would enable the United States to project its power to the very shores of Japan's Home Islands. A succession of Orange war

plans—Orange stood for Japan in a series of color-coded planning documents—provided the strategy for the amphibious offensive required to defeat Japan and the defensive measures to protect the bases upon which the American campaign would depend.

As a militaristic Japan made inroads into China in the 1930s, concern heightened for the security of Wake, Midway, Johnston, and Palmyra Islands, the outposts protecting Hawaii, a vital staging area for a war in the Pacific. (Although actually atolls—tiny islands clustered on a reef-fringed lagoon—Wake, Midway, Johnston, and Palmyra have traditionally been referred to as islands.) By 1937, the Marine Corps was discussing the establishment of battalion-size security detachments on the key Pacific outposts, and the following year's War Plan Orange proposed dispatching this sort of defense detachment to three of the Hawaiian outposts—Wake, Midway, and Johnston. The 1938 plan called for a detachment of 28 officers and 428 enlisted Marines at Midway, armed with 5-inch coastal defense guns, 3-inch anti-aircraft weapons, searchlights for illuminating targets at night, and machine guns. The Wake detachment, similarly equipped, was to be slightly smaller, 25 officers and 420 enlisted men. The Johnston Island group would consist of just nine officers and 126 enlisted men and have only the anti-aircraft guns, searchlights, and machine guns. The plan called for the units to deploy by M-Day—the date of an American mobilization for war—"in sufficient strength to repel minor

On the Cover: *The crew of a 90mm gun stands by for action in the Solomons during November 1943. (Department of Defense photo [USMC])*

At left: *Defense battalion Marines man a 5-inch seacoast gun at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. (Department of Defense photo [USMC])*



Department of Defense photo (USCG)

Fires started by bombs dropped by Japanese aircraft are still burning at Pearl Harbor as Marines set up a 3-inch anti-aircraft gun on the parade ground of the Marine Barracks. By the end of 1942, 14 Marine defense battalions were in existence.

naval raids and raids by small landing parties." In the fall of 1938, an inspection party visited the sites to look for possible gun positions and fields of fire and to validate the initial manpower estimates.

Meanwhile, a Congressionally authorized board, headed by Admiral Arthur J. Hepburn, a former Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, investigated the need to acquire additional naval bases in preparation for war. While determining that Guam, surrounded by Japanese possessions, could not be defended; the Hepburn Board emphasized the importance of Midway, Wake, Johnston, and Palmyra. As a result, during 1939 and 1940, Colonel Harry K. Pickett—Marine Officer, 14th Naval District, and Commanding Officer, Marine Barracks, Pearl Harbor Navy Yard—made detailed surveys of the four atolls.

In 1940, the Army and Navy blended the various color plans, including Orange, into a series of Rainbow Plans designed to meet a threat from Germany, Japan, and Italy acting in concert. The plan that seemed most realistic, Rainbow 5, envisioned that an Anglo-American coalition would wage war against all three

potential enemies, defeating Germany first, while conducting only limited offensive operations in the Pacific, and ultimately throwing the full weight of the alliance against Japan. Such was the basic strategy in effect when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor.

An Organization for Base Defense

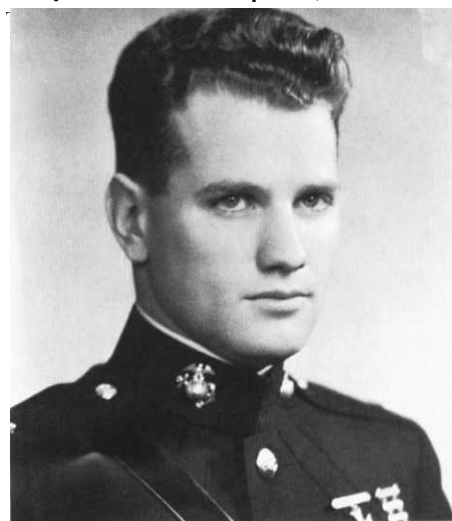
The interest of the Marine Corps in base defense predated the proposal in the Orange Plan of 1937 to install defense detachments at Wake, Midway, and Johnston Islands. Although the spirit of the offensive predominated over the years, both the Advanced Base Force, 1914-1919, and the Fleet Marine Force, established in 1933, trained to defend the territory they seized. In 1936, despite the absence of primarily defensive units, the Marine Corps Schools at Quantico, Virginia, taught a 10-month course in base defense, stressing coordination among aviation, anti-aircraft, and artillery.

The increasingly volatile situation in the Pacific, which led ultimately to war, the evolving Orange plan for a war against Japan, and the long-time interest of the Marine Corps in base defense set the stage for the cre-

ation of defense battalions to garrison the crescent of outposts stretching from Wake and Midway to Samoa. Influenced by American isolationist attitudes, Major General Commandant Thomas Holcomb decided to ask for funds to form new defensive—rather than offensive—units. In carrying out the provisions of the plan for a conflict with Orange, the Commandant intended

1stLt George H. Cannon of the 6th Defense Battalion, though mortally wounded by fire from a Japanese submarine on 7 December 1941, refused to leave his post on Midway. After the war, he was awarded the Medal of Honor.

Department of Defense photo (USMC) 11158



to make the best use of appropriated funds, which had only begun to increase after the outbreak of war in Europe during September 1939. In doing so he reminded the public that the Marine Corps would play a vital role in defending the nation. After the war, General Gerald C. Thomas recalled in his oral history that General Holcomb realized that Congress was unlikely to vote money for purely offensive purposes as long as the United States remained at peace. At a time when even battleships and heavy bombers were being touted as defensive weapons, Holcomb seized on the concept of defense battalions as a means of increasing the strength of the Corps beyond the current 19,432 officers and men.

Two officers at Marine Corps headquarters, Colonel Charles D. Barrett and Lieutenant Colonel Robert H. Pepper, turned concept into reality by drawing up detailed plans for organizations expressly designed to defend advance bases. The Kentucky-born Barrett entered the Marine Corps in 1909, served in the occupation of Vera Cruz, Mexico, in 1914, and during World War II would become a major general; in 1943, while commanding I Marine Amphibious Corps, he died as a result of an accident. Pepper, would

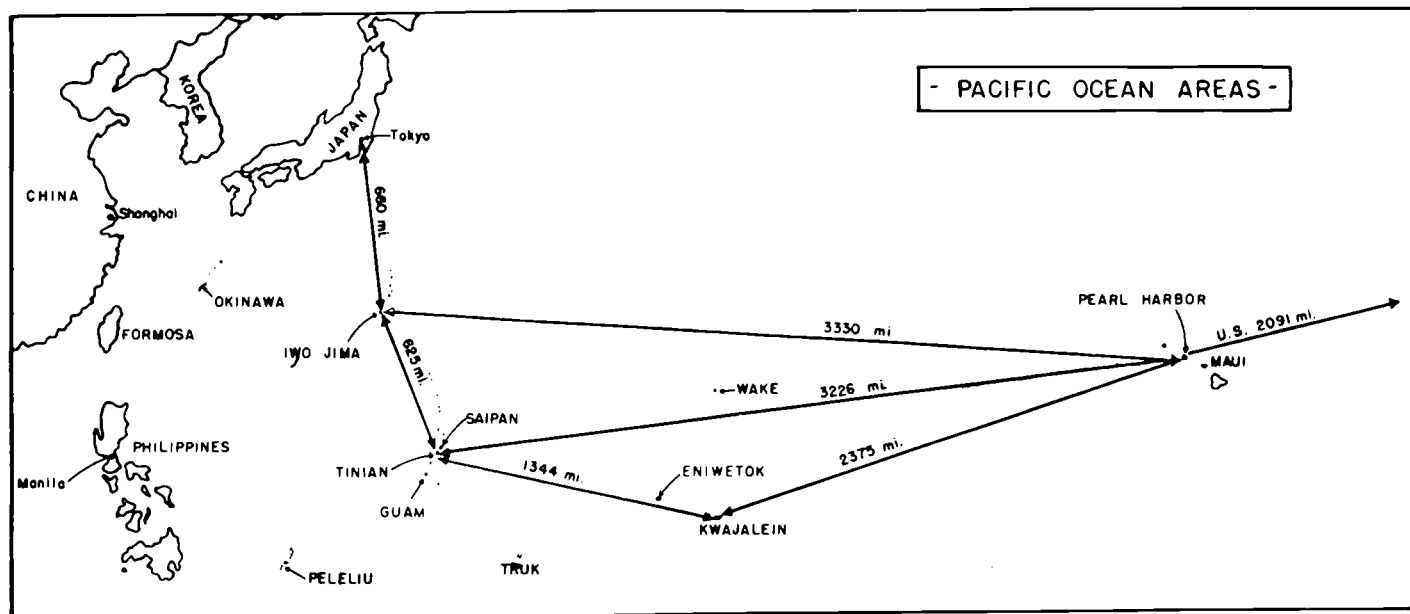
rise to the rank of lieutenant general, assuming command of Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, after the war. Aware that isolationism still gripped the United States in 1939, the two planners emphasized the defensive mission of the new units, stressing their ability to "hold areas for the ultimate offensive operations of the Fleet." As the danger of war with Japan increased, the first of several 900-man defense battalions took shape in the United States. Each of the new outfits consisted of three anti-aircraft batteries, three seacoast batteries, ground and anti-aircraft machine gun batteries, and a team of specialists in administration and weapons maintenance.

In late 1939, when the Marine Corps formed its first defense battalions, the future was still obscure. Japan remained heavily engaged in China, but a "phony war" persisted in western Europe. At Marine Corps headquarters, some advocates of the defense battalions may have felt that these new units were all the service would need by way of expansion, at least for now. On the other hand, within the G-3 Division of Holcomb's staff, officers like Colonel Pedro A. del Valle kept their eyes fixed on a more ambitious goal, the organization of Marine divisions. Eventually, the Marine Corps would expand,

creating six divisions and reaching a maximum strength in excess of 450,000, but the frenzied growth occurred after Japan attacked the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941.

In the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of war in Europe and President Franklin D. Roosevelt's declaration of a limited national emergency, the Marine Corps grew by small increments that included the defense battalions. To explain the role of these units, General Holcomb in 1940 circulated throughout the Corps a classified document drafted by First Lieutenant Robert D. Heinl, Jr., who would serve in a wartime defense battalion, become the author of widely read articles and books and active in the Marine Corps historical program, and attain the grade of colonel. Heinl declared that "through sheer necessity, the Marine Corps has devised a sort of expeditionary coast artillery capable of occupying an untenanted and undefended locality, of installing an all around sea-air defense, and this within three days."

In his annual report to the Secretary of the Navy for the fiscal year ending in June 1940, General Holcomb stated that four battalions had been established and two others authorized. "The use of all six of these defense battalions can be fore-

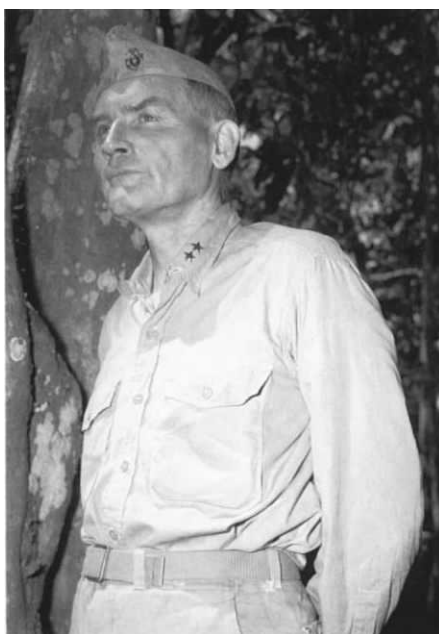


seen in existing plans," he wrote, adding that the fleet commanders had already requested additional units of this type. The new organizations took advantage of the latest advances in automatic weapons, radios, tanks, coast and antiaircraft artillery, sound-ranging gear, and the new mystery – radar. Teams of specialists, which had mastered an array of technical skills, it was hoped would enable a comparatively small unit to defend a beachhead or airfield complex against attack from the sea or sky. As time passed and strategic circumstances changed, the defense battalions varied in strength, weaponry, and other gear. As an official historical summary of the defense battalions has pointed out, their composition also reflected "the geographic nature of their location and the availability of equipment." Consequently, the same battalion might require a different mix of specialists over the years.

Organization and Equipment for the Defense Battalion

Envisioned as combined arms teams capable of delivering intense firepower, defense battalions were expected to have their greatest impact in the kind of campaign outlined in the Orange plan. The Navy's seagoing transports provided strategic mobility for the defense battalions, but once ashore, the units lacked vehicles and manpower for tactical mobility. Because the battalion became essentially immobile when it landed, each member had a battle station, as on a ship, to operate a particular crew-served weapon or other piece of equipment. As configured in 1939 and 1940, a defense battalion could achieve mobility on land only by leaving its artillery, searchlights, and detection gear and fighting as infantry.

Marine Corps defense battalions could operate as integral units in support of a base or beachhead, positioning their weapons and equipment



Department of Defense photo (USMC) 61403 MajGen Charles D. Barrett, while a colonel, together with LtCol Robert H. Pepper, played a major role in the development of the defense battalion.

to cover assigned sectors and meet specific threats. Moreover, they might form detachments with a size and armament suitable for a particular task, such as defending various islets within an atoll or protecting separate beachheads. Although relatively static when in place, the ability of the battalions to divide in this fashion provided a kind of flexibility that may not have been fully appreciated in 1939, when the basic concept placed one battalion, though of variable size, at a given place.

Because a defense battalion could, in effect, form task organizations, it somewhat resembled the larger infantry regiment, which could employ battalion combat teams. According to Lieutenant Heinl, in terms of "strength and variety of material," the defense battalion "might well be a regiment. Actually, the seacoast and antiaircraft artillery groups are almost small battalions, while the other three separate batteries (searchlight and sound locator and the two machine gun units) are undeniable batteries in the accepted sense of the word."

Despite the lieutenant's enthusiasm

for the defense battalions, they had definite weaknesses, particularly in infantry and armor for mobile reserves in the event of a large-scale enemy landing. The failings, however, seemed acceptable to the General Board of the Navy – roughly comparable to the War Department's General Staff – which felt that the battalions could nevertheless protect outlying bases against raids by aircraft, ships, and comparatively small landing parties. Concern that the defense battalions, in their current configuration, might not be able to repulse more ambitious hostile landings caused the Marine Corps to debate, during the spring of 1941, the feasibility of creating separate infantry battalions to fight alongside the defense units.

The proposed 850-man infantry battalions would forestall any possible need to detail infantrymen from the regiments to reinforce the defense battalions. Consequently, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox approved the creation of separate infantry battalions to serve with the defense battalions. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the regiments and divisions – and for a time the specialized units such as the raiders – demanded a lion's share of manpower, and with few exceptions, the defense battalions had to fend for themselves without the planned infantry battalions, though occasionally with an organic rifle company. Every Marine in a typical defense battalion had to train to fight as an infantryman in an emergency, with the members of gun and searchlight crews leaving their usual battle stations. Rifle companies served at various times with the 6th, 7th, and 51st Defense Battalions, and such a component was planned for the 52d, but not assigned. Those battalions that included a company of infantry bore the title "composite."

Improvements in equipment, a changing strategic situation, and deployment in areas that varied from

desolate coral atolls to dense jungle ensured that no single table of equipment or organization could apply at all times to every defense battalion. Each of the organizations tended to be unique—"one of a kind," as a battalion's history stated. Weapons and personnel reflected a unit's destination and duties, much as a child's erector set took the shape dictated by the person assembling the parts, or such was the view of James H. Powers, a veteran of the 8th Defense Battalion. The selection and assignment of men and equipment proved a dynamic process, as units moved about, split into detachments, underwent redesignation, and traded old equipment for new. Much of the weapons and material came from the stocks of the U.S. Army, which had similarly equipped coast and antiaircraft artillery units. The first 155mm guns dated from World War I, but the Army quickly made modern types available, along with new 90mm antiaircraft guns that replaced the 3-inch weapons initially used by the defense battalions. In addition, the Army provided both primitive sound-ranging equipment and three types of Signal Corps radar—the early-model SCR268 and SCR270 and the more advanced SCR268, which provided automatic target tracking and gun-laying.

By October 1941, the tables of organization for the new defense battalions had certain features in common, each calling for a headquarters battery, a sound-locator and searchlight battery, a 5-inch seacoast artillery group, a 3-inch antiaircraft group, and a machine-gun group. The specific allocation of personnel and equipment within each battalion depended, however, on where the battalion deployed and the changes "prescribed by the Commandant from time to time." In brief, the defense battalions adhered to certain standard configurations, with individual variations due to time and circumstance. The average battalion

strength during the war was 1,372 officers and men, including Navy medical personnel. Like manpower, the equipment used by the defense battalions also varied, although the armament of the typical wartime unit consisted of eight 155mm guns, twelve 90mm guns, nineteen 40mm guns, twenty-eight 20mm guns, and thirty-five .50-caliber heavy machine guns, supplemented in some instances by eight M3 light tanks.

The Approach of War

Beginning early in 1940, the defense battalions operated independently, or in concert with larger units, to secure strategic locations in the Atlantic and the Pacific. Colonel Harry K. Pickett's 3d Defense Battalion undertook to support the current War Plan Orange by occupying Midway Island on 29 September 1940, setting up its weapons on two bleak, sandy spits described by one Marine as being "inhabited by more than a million birds." Contingency plans for the Atlantic approaches to the Western Hemisphere called for deploying defense battalions in support of a possible landing in Martinique during October 1940, but the crisis passed. In February of the following year, the 4th Defense Battalion, under Colonel Jesse L. Perkins, secured the rocky and brush-covered hills overlooking Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. A composite unit of infantry and artillery, the 7th Defense Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Lester A. Dessez, landed at American Samoa in March 1941 and became the first element of the Fleet Marine Force to deploy to the Southern Hemisphere during the prewar national emergency. Besides securing naval and air bases, the battalion trained a self-defense force of Samoan Marines.

Plans to forestall a German invasion of the Azores by sending a mixed force of soldiers and Marines, including defense battalions, proved unnecessary, but the most ambitious of the prewar deployments occurred

in the Atlantic. In June 1941, Colonel Lloyd L. Leech's 5th Defense Battalion, less its seacoast artillery component, arrived in Iceland with the 1st Marine Brigade, which included the 6th Marines, an infantry regiment, and the 2d Battalion, 10th Marines, an artillery outfit. The brigade took over the defense of Iceland from British troops, releasing them from the protection of this critical region for even more important duty elsewhere. Once in place, the defense battalion and the other Marines assumed responsibility for helping keep open the Atlantic sea lanes to the United Kingdom.

The 5th Defense Battalion set up its antiaircraft weapons, 3-inch guns and machine guns, around the Reykjavik airfield and harbor, where it became the first Marine Corps unit to make operational use of the Army-developed SCR-268 and -270 radars. After-action reports covering the battalion's service in Iceland, declared that only "young, wide-awake, intelligent men" could operate the temperamental sets satisfactorily. Thanks to the efforts of the crews, the Marines proved able to incorporate their radar into the British air-defense and fighter-control system for "routine watches and training." Even though the battalion played a critical role in defending against long-range German patrol planes, its members also had to engage in labor and construction duty, as became common in other areas. Replaced by Army units, the last elements of the Marine garrison force left Iceland in March 1942.

Of the seven Marine defense battalions organized by late 1941, one stood guard in Iceland, five served in the Pacific—including the 4th, posted briefly at Guantanamo Bay—and another trained on the west coast for a westward deployment. The first Pacific-based defense battalions were nicknamed the "Rainbow Five" after the war plan in effect when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Naval Institute

On Iceland, 5th Defense Battalion Marines, attached to the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, man a 75mm pack howitzer as British officers of the Iceland garrison look on. Note the

polar bear patches on the right shoulders of the onlooking Marine officers. In the background are truck-mounted .50-caliber anti-aircraft machine guns on special tripods.

five units were: the 7th in Samoa; the 6th, which took over from a detachment of the 3d at Midway Island; the 3d and 4th at Pearl Harbor, and the 1st divided among Pearl Harbor and Johnston, Palmyra, and Wake Islands. A sixth defense battalion, the 2d, remained in training in California.

The Saga of Wake Island

The first real test of the base defense concept in the Pacific War began with savage air attacks against Wake Island on 8 December and lasted 15 days. Wake's defenders lacked radar and sound-ranging equipment, forcing the 400-man Marine garrison to rely on optical equipment to spot and identify the attacking aircraft, which inflicted heavy losses on the Americans during the first bombing raids. Commander Winfield S. Cunningham, who headed the Wake Island naval base, later insisted that "one radar" could have turned defeat

into victory. In contrast, Technical Sergeant Charles A. Holmes, a fire-control specialist, believed that radar "would never have affected the outcome of the situation . . ." The set, moreover, might have fallen into Japanese hands sufficiently intact to yield useful intelligence.

On 11 December, the fire of the 5-inch guns of Major George H. Potter's coastal defense batteries forced the withdrawal of the first Japanese naval assault force consisting of three cruisers, their escorting destroyers, and a pair of troop transports. A Marine communications officer vividly remembered the repeated attacks by Japanese aircraft throughout the siege. During each raid, he said, "one or two would be smoking from machine gun or anti-aircraft fire." Captain Bryghte D. Godbold's 3-inch anti-aircraft group seemed especially deadly, and sometimes one or two aircraft would be missing from a Japanese formation as it flew out of

range. Gun crews stayed with their weapons during the increasingly stronger air raids, while those Marines not needed at their battle stations were "hotfooting it for shelter."

Early on, the Marines realized they were fighting a losing battle, although, as Technical Sergeant Holmes pointed out, "We did our best to defend the atoll . . ." and to prevent the Japanese from establishing themselves there. With limited means at their disposal—the weapons of the defense detachment and a few fighter planes—the Marines sank one warship with aerial bombs and another with artillery fire, and during the final assault inflicted hundreds of casualties on the Japanese who stormed ashore from self-propelled barges and two light transports beached on the reef. On the morning of 23 December, before a relief expedition could get close enough to help, the defenders of Wake Island surrendered.

While the Wake Island garrison fought against overwhelming numbers and ultimately had to yield, Japanese naval forces began a short-lived harassment of Johnston and Palmyra that lasted until late December and stopped short of attempted landings. On 12 December, shells from a pair of submarines detonated a 12,000-gallon fuel storage tank on Johnston Island, but fire from 5-inch coast defense guns emplaced there forced the raiders to submerge. Similarly, a battery on Palmyra drove off a submarine that shelled the island on Christmas Eve.

A Defensive Buildup

The delays and confusion attendant upon organizing and mounting the relief expedition, which included the 4th Defense Battalion and ships that had survived the onslaught against Pearl Harbor, demonstrated the limits of improvisation. As a result, the Marine Corps acted promptly to reinforce the outlying garrisons still in American hands. The defense battalions at Pearl Harbor provided additional men and material for Midway, Johnston, and Palmyra Islands, and defense battalions fresh from training deployed to

the Pacific. The war thus entered a defensive phase that contained the advancing Japanese and lasted into the summer of 1942.

On 21 January, the 2d Marine Brigade (the 8th Marines and the 2d Battalion, 10th Marines, the latter recently returned from Iceland) arrived in Samoa, along with Lieutenant Colonel Raymond E. Knapp's 2d Defense Battalion. The newcomers built on the foundation supplied by the 7th Defense Battalion and were themselves reinforced by the newly activated 8th Defense Battalion under Lieutenant Colonel Augustus W. Cockrell. The Marines in Samoa anchored a line of bases and airfields that protected the exposed sea routes to Australia and New Zealand, which were judged likely objectives for the advancing Japanese.

On 27 May 1942, the 8th Defense Battalion moved southwest from Samoa to the Wallis Islands, a French possession. Tanks, field artillery, motor transport, and infantry reinforced the defense battalion, which remained there through 1943. The stay proved uneventful except for a visit from Eleanor Roosevelt, the President's wife, who was touring the Pacific theater of war.

Elsewhere in the Pacific, Lieutenant Colonel Harold D. Shannon's 6th Defense Battalion strengthened the defenses of Midway where, by the spring of 1942, reinforcements arrived in the form of the antiaircraft group of the 3d Defense Battalion, plus radar, light tanks, aircraft, infantrymen, and raiders. The Palmyra garrison was redesignated the 1st Marine Defense Battalion—of which it had been a detachment before March 1942—under Lieutenant Colonel Bert A. Bone, with the detachment on Johnston Island reverting to control of the island commander. During March, the flow of reinforcements to the South Pacific continued, as Army troops arrived in New Caledonia and the New Hebrides, while Marine aviators and Colonel Harold S. Fassett's 4th Defense Battalion established itself on the island of Efate in the latter group.

West of Midway Island, between 4 and 6 June 1942, the course of the war changed abruptly when an American carrier task force sank four Japanese aircraft carriers and destroyed the cadre of veteran fliers who had won the opening naval battles of the war from Pearl Harbor to the In-

The 5th Defense Battalion lived in Nissen hut camps as this and weatherproofed by the Marines upon their arrival and throughout the unit's stay in Iceland. Most of them were built before the onset of the exceptionally cold Icelandic winter.

Department of Defense photo (USMC) 528669





Marine Corps Historical Collection

Smoke rises from Wake Island after a Japanese air attack. The command post used by the detachment of the 1st Defense Battalion lies in the right foreground.

dian Ocean. A reinforced defense battalion, though hundreds of miles from the actual sinkings, contributed greatly to the American victory. Since the fall of Wake Island, American reinforcements had poured into Midway. Colonel Shannon's 6th Defense Battalion, now 1,700-strong, helped build the island's defenses even as it stood guard against an anticipated Japanese attack. The labor projects included constructing underwater obstacles, unloading and distributing supplies, and building emplacements for guns and shelters for ammunition and personnel. Shannon told his Marines that "Our job is to hold Midway . . . Keep cool, calm, and collected; make your bullets count."

On 4 June, the Japanese opened the Battle of Midway by launching a massive air strike designed to soften the island for invasion. Radar picked up the attackers at a distance of 100 miles and identified them at 93 miles, providing warning for Midway-based fighters to intercept and antiaircraft batteries to prepare for action. The struggle began at about 0630 and had ended by 0700, with the deadliest of the fighting by the defense battalion compressed into what one participant described as a "furious 17-minute action." The Marine antiaircraft gunners claimed the destruction of 10 of the attackers, but damage at Midway

proved severe, with flames and smoke billowing from a fuel storage area and aircraft hangars. The island's defenders remained in the fight, however, causing the Japanese naval commander to decide on a follow-up attack. His ordnance specialists were in the midst of replacing armor-piercing bombs, designed for use against ships, with high explosives for ground targets, when the American carrier pilots pounced in the first of their devastating attacks. The resistance by the Marines at Midway, both the aviators and the members of the defense battalion, thus helped set the stage for one of the decisive naval battles of World War II.

After making this contribution to

Defense battalion commander Maj James P. S. Devereaux pressed this ammunition bunker into service as his command post during the defense of Wake Island.

Photo by the author

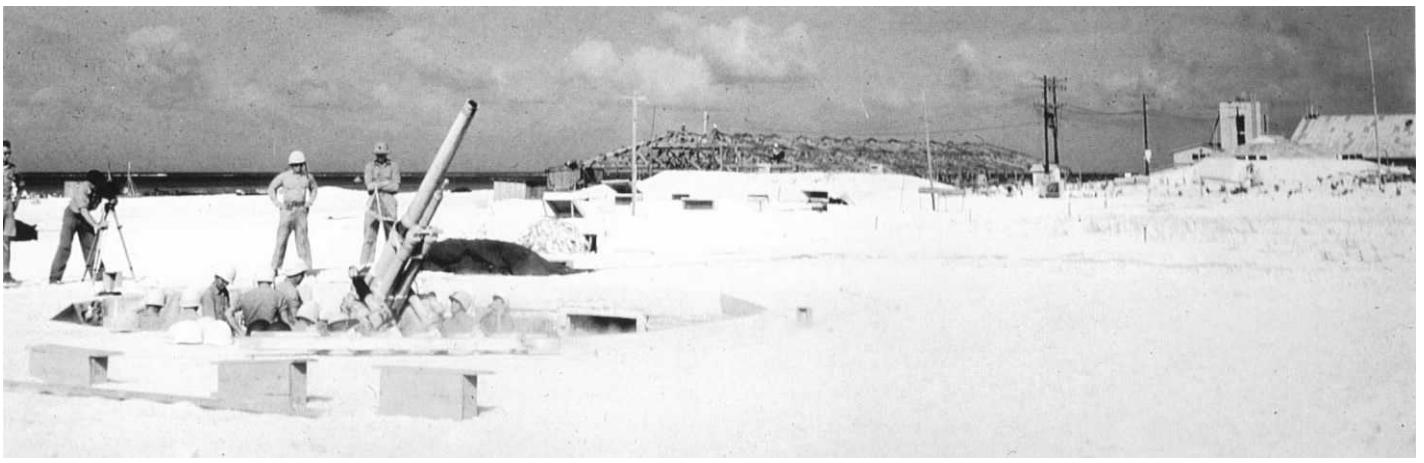


eventual victory over Japan, the 6th Defense Battalion remained at Midway for the rest of the war. As one of its Marines, Ned Tetlow, pointed out, the long stay enabled the unit to develop a "distinct identity."

During the defensive phase of the Pacific War, the defense battalion underwent conceptual changes back in the United States. Two new tables of organization and equipment received official approval in the spring of 1942. One called for a battalion of 1,146 officers and men that had a headquarters and service battery, a 155mm artillery group of two batteries, a 90mm antiaircraft artillery group of three batteries, plus a searchlight battery, and a special weapons group, made up of one battery each of Browning machine guns, Oerlikon 20mm cannon, and Bofors 40mm cannon. The other document called for a slightly smaller composite unit, in which a rifle company and a pack howitzer battery replaced some of the less mobile weapons. Moreover, plans called for one of the composite defense battalions organized in 1942 to be manned by African-Americans under command of white officers.

Two African-American Defense Battalions

The wartime demand for manpower and the racial policy of the



Department of Defense photo (USMC) 55863

Under a heavily clouded sky, Marines of the 16th Defense Battalion man a 3-inch anti-aircraft artillery position on Johnston Island. Note the absence of protective parapets or camouflage. Johnston was not seriously threatened in the course of the war.

Roosevelt administration caused the Marine Corps to agree in February 1942 to accept African-American recruits for the first time since the Revolutionary War, when a few blacks had served in the Continental Marines. The Commandant, General Holcomb, insisted that racial segregation – not only lawful in most places at the time, but enforced throughout much of American society – would prevail and that the African-Americans would perform useful military duty. To gain a military advantage from these recruits, without integrating the races, the Marine Corps decided to group them in a black unit that could train largely in isolation and fight almost independently. Holcomb's policy resulted in the creation of the 51st Defense Battalion (Composite), com-

manded by whites but manned by African-Americans who had trained at the Montford Point Camp, a racially segregated facility at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

A decision to use the draft, beginning in January 1943, as the normal means of obtaining manpower for all the services brought more blacks into the Marine Corps than a single battalion – plus its training base and administrative overhead – could absorb. The transition of the 51st from a composite unit to an ordinary defense battalion released infantrymen and howitzer crews to help form a cadre for a second African-American defense battalion, the 52d. Because the nature of the conflict was again changing as the advance toward Japan accelerated, the Marine Corps organized no additional black

defense battalions, instead creating numerous independent companies to provide logistics support for amphibious operations.

The steps taken in May 1942 toward standardized equipment began bringing order to a sometimes bewildering array of new and old, simple and complex. When a veteran master sergeant joined one of the defense battalions as a replacement, he asked to see the "new 155mm guns," but, to his astonishment, was shown a weapon fabricated in 1918. "I thought we had new guns here!" he bellowed. The radio gear and radar required unceasing maintenance and fine-tuning by specialists who themselves were fresh from training. Radar, in particular, seemed a mystery to the uninitiated and a challenge to the newly minted technicians. In

In the 4 June 1942 Japanese air raid on Midway a number of Marines in the garrison, including some from the 6th Defense Battalion, were killed. Here, the surviving Marines prepare to bury their buddies with full military honors.

Department of Defense photo (USN) 12703



Shoulder Insignia

Marines serving with the Army's 2d Division in World War I wore the Indian-head shoulder patch, and during the occupation of Iceland, in late 1941 and early 1942, members of the Marine brigade adopted the polar-bear flash worn by the British garrison they were relieving. The Marines who sewed on the polar-bear insignia included men of the 5th Defense Battalion. Marine shoulder insignia proliferated after the official recognition of the 1st Marine Division's patch in 1943.

The designs chosen by the wartime defense battalions might either reflect the insignia of a Marine amphibious corps or of the Fleet Marine Force Pacific, but they might also be created by the individual battalion. Worn on the left shoulder of field jackets, overcoats, service blouses and shirts, the patches identified individual Marines as members of a specific unit. On 1 August 1945, Marine Corps headquarters recognized 33 such designs, although others existed.



evaluating the radar specialists, Captain Wade W. Larkin explained that the device was "technically complex enough for them to be justifiably proud of what they were doing," even though they could not talk openly about so "confidential" a piece of equipment. At the time, radar was cutting-edge technology; Vern C. Smith, who helped operate one of the new sets in the Wallis Islands, recalled that his SCR-268, acquired from another battalion, was so new that its serial number "was a single digit."

The South Pacific

The demarcation between the defensive phase and the beginnings of the counteroffensive proved blurred at the time. Despite the American victory at Midway, the enemy seemed dangerous, aggressive, and capable of resuming the offensive. To forestall the threat to the sea lanes between Hawaii and Australia, the 4th Defense Battalion in July 1942 provided a detachment to protect Espiritu Santo. However, the invasion of the southern Solomon Islands and its immediate con-

sequences clearly reversed the tide of war in the Pacific.

On 7 August 1942, the 3d Defense Battalion, commanded by Colonel Robert H. Pepper, who had been so instrumental in creating this kind of unit, landed in support of the 1st Marine Division's attack on Guadalcanal and the subsequent defense of the island against Japanese counterthrusts. The machine gun and antiaircraft groups landed "almost with the first waves" at Guadalcanal, although the seacoast artillery did not arrive until late August. Once the coastal



Department of Defense photo (USMC)

African-American Marines of the 51st Defense Battalion are shown here in training at Montford Point, Camp Lejeune, before their deployment to the Pacific War.

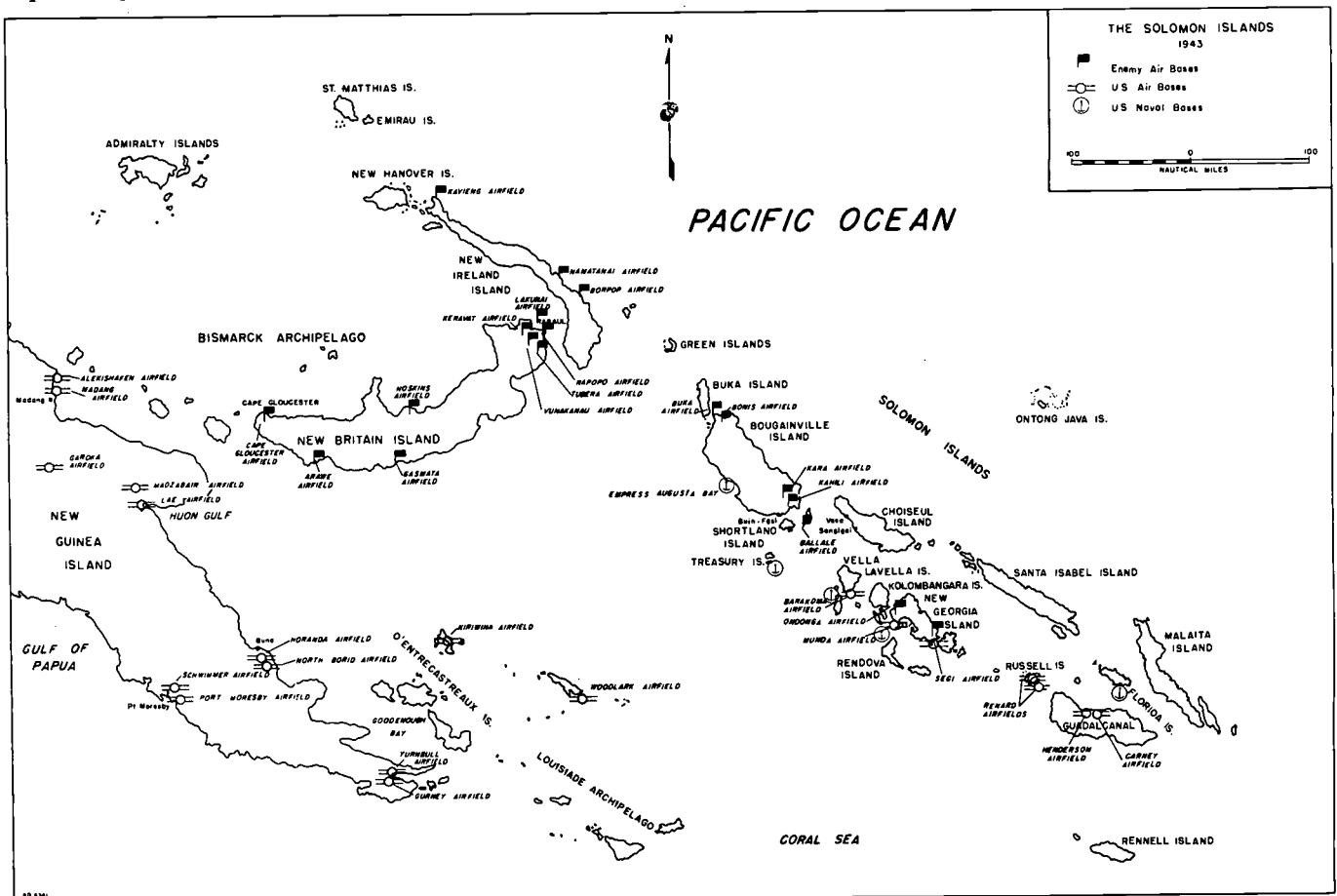
defense guns were ashore, they scored hits on three enemy ships that had beached themselves to land troops. In general, the 3d Defense

Battalion lent strength to the defenses of Lunga Point, Henderson Field—named for Major Lofton R. Henderson, a Marine aviator killed in the

Battle of Midway—and the naval base established on the nearby island of Tulagi. In early September, the 5th Defense Battalion, led by Lieutenant Colonel William F. Parks, supplied a detachment that took over at Tulagi.

A combat correspondent with the 1st Marine Division, Technical Sergeant George McMillan, described the initial lodgment on Guadalcanal as a “stretch of beach, acres of straight-lined coconut grove, the fields of head-high kunai grass, and jungle-covered foothills.” Six months of violent counterattacks by Japanese air, ground, and naval forces shattered the appearance of calm. Throughout the fighting “malaria, jungle rot, and malnutrition” plagued the Americans, according to Second Lieutenant Cyril P. Zurlinden, Jr., of the 2d Marine Division, which replaced the 1st Marine Division in January 1943, after the 1st had left the previous December.

Elements of the 5th Defense Battalion not needed at Tulagi occupied





Department of Defense photo (USMC) 62095

The 3d Defense Battalion operated this SCR268, the first search radar established on Guadalcanal after the 1st Marine Division landed there on 7 August 1942.

Funafuti in the Ellice Islands on 2 October 1942. The Ellice force set up its weapons hundreds of miles from the nearest major American base and for the next 11 months held the northernmost position in the South Pacific, just short of the boundary between that area and the Central Pacific. The battalion's commanding officer, Colonel George F. Good, Jr., recalled that his ragtag antiaircraft and ground defenses "stuck out like a sore thumb." The Ellice Islands served as a staging area for raids on the Japanese-held Gilbert Islands and consequently bore the brunt of some 10 Japanese air attacks, during which the 90mm antiaircraft guns downed at least six bombers. Meanwhile, elements of the 5th Defense Battalion on Tulagi combined in January 1943 with a 5-inch battery from the 3d to become the 14th Defense Battalion.

The 9th Defense Battalion, under Colonel David R. Nimmer, reached Guadalcanal in December 1942, set up its weapons around the airfield complex at Koli Point, and promptly destroyed a dozen enemy aircraft. Francis E. Chadwick, a member of the artillery group, recalled that the unit "met only stragglers upon landing and found an undersize, beaten

enemy battalion." The Marine defense battalion thereupon began reequipping in preparation for the next move up the Solomons chain. In January 1943, the 11th Defense Battalion, commanded by Colonel Charles N. Muldrow, relieved the 9th Battalion of its responsibilities at Guadalcanal.

South Pacific Tales

Marines serving in the defense battalions learned lessons—some of them immortalized in legend—not

Searchlights and antiaircraft weapons of the 3d Defense Battalion on Guadalcanal point upwards to detect and destroy Japanese aircraft bombing Allied forces.

Department of Defense photo (USMC) 63327



taught in training or in the manuals. They learned about "air-raid coffee," strong enough to "lift one's scalp several inches per gulp." Coffee pots would go on the fire when things were quiet; then the air-raid alarm would signal Condition Red, which meant that an air raid was imminent, and the Marines would man their battle stations, sometimes for hours, waiting for and fighting off the attackers as the coffee boiled merrily away. The resulting brew became thick enough to eat with a fork, and Master Technical Sergeant Theodore C. Link claimed that the coffee "snapped back at the drinker."

Veterans also learned to take advantage of members of newly arrived units, lavishly supplied but inexperienced in the ways of the world. A widely told story related how "wolf-hungry" Marines, who had been subsisting on canned rations, smelled steaks cooking at a field galley run by another service. As Technical Sergeant Asa Bordages told it, a Marine shouted "Condition Red! Condition Red!" The air raid signal sent the newcomers scrambling for cover, and by the time they realized it was a false alarm, the Marines were gone, and so were the steaks.

While American forces secured



Department of Defense photo (USMC) 51652

An aging M1918 155mm gun, manned by the 5th Defense Battalion, stands guard over the Pacific surf from amid the beachfront palms at Funafuti in the Ellice Islands, the first stop in the Pacific following the unit's departure from Iceland.

Guadalcanal and improved the security of the supply line to Australia and New Zealand, increasing numbers of Marines arrived in the Pacific, many of them members of defense battalions. The number of these units totaled 14 at the end of 1942, and the Marine Corps continued to form new ones into the following year. Three other divisions were activated during 1943, and a sixth would take shape during 1944. As the Pacific campaigns progressed, the various divisions and other units were assigned in varying combinations to corps commands. Eventually the V Amphibious Corps operated from Hawaii westward; the I Marine Amphibious Corps had its headquarters on Noumea but would become the III Amphibious Corps on 15 April 1944, before it moved its base to the liberated island of Guam.

From Guadalcanal, the Marines joined in advancing into the central and northern Solomons during the summer and fall of 1943, forming

one jaw of a pincers designed to converge on the Japanese base at Rabaul on the island of New Britain. While General Douglas MacArthur, the Army officer in command in the Southwest Pacific, masterminded the Rabaul campaign as an initial step toward the liberation of the Philippines, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz prepared for a thrust across the Pacific from Hawaii through the Gilbert and Marshall Islands. By the end of 1943, Marines would gain a lodgment in the northern Solomons and land in the Gilberts and on New Britain; clearly the United States was on the move.

Once the American counteroffensive got under way in earnest, the mission of the typical defense battalion changed. Initially, the defense battalions were expected to land at a site already under friendly control—either a previously developed base or a beachhead secured by assault troops—and remain until relieved. In actual practice, this con-

cept did not work, for it overlooked the vulnerability of amphibious forces, especially to aerial attack, during and immediately after a landing. Experience dictated that the defense battalions land with the assault waves, whenever possible, and immediately set up their weapons. Besides protecting the beachhead during its most vulnerable period, the battalions freed other elements of the Fleet Marine Force from responsibility for guarding airfields and harbors. Whatever their role, the defense battalions received less coverage in the press than airmen, infantry, or raiders. A veteran of the 11th Defense Battalion, Donald T. Regan, who would become Secretary of the Treasury in the cabinet of President Ronald Reagan, remembered the anonymity that cloaked these units. "I felt," he said, "we were doing quite a bit to protect those who were doing the more public fighting."

In providing this protection, in which Regan took such pride,



Department of Defense photo (USMC) 59215

This 3d Defense Battalion 90mm anti-aircraft gun, dug in at Guadalcanal, served in a dual role with its ability to engage targets on the ground as well as in the air.

defense battalions on Guadalcanal operated long-range radar integrated with the control network of Marine Aircraft Group 23. Lieutenant Colonel Walter L. J. Bayler—the last

man off Wake Island, who had carried dispatches to Pearl Harbor on the only Navy plane to reach Wake during the siege—declared that the group's fighters were "highly success-

ful in the destruction of enemy aircraft" whenever the improvised warning system was functioning. This experience may well have influenced a decision to convene a radar board at Marine Corps headquarters.

Formed in February 1943, the board was headed by Bayler and included Lieutenant Colonel Edward C. Dyer, who was thoroughly familiar with the techniques and equipment used by Britain's Royal Air Force to direct fighters. The board standardized procedures for "plotting, filtering, telling, and warning," as the radar specialists fed information to a direction center that integrated anti-aircraft and coastal defense, the primary responsibilities of the defense battalions, with the interception of attacking aircraft by pilots of the Marine Corps, Army, or Navy. The radar board refused, moreover, to lift the veil of secrecy that concealed the radar program, directing that "no further items on the subject would be released" until the Army and Navy were convinced the enemy already had the information from some other source.

Into the Central and Northern Solomons

On 21 February 1943, the 43d Infantry Division, the 3d Raider Bat-

Antiaircraft Artillery

The defense battalions employed several different weapons against the attack of enemy aircraft.

The M3 3-inch anti-aircraft gun, initially used in shipboard and ground defense, was the heaviest weapon available to the Marines when the defense battalions were organized. When positioned, the gun rested on a folding M2A2 platform, dubbed a 'spider' mount, which had four long stabilizing outriggers. The gun fired a 12.87-pound high explosive round which had a maximum horizontal range of 14,780 yards and could nearly reach a 10,000-yard ceiling. The weapons, each having an eight-man crew who could fire 25 rounds per minute, were organized in the battalions in four-gun batteries. They were successfully employed at Wake, Johnston, Palmyra, and Midway Islands. By the summer of 1942, however, the M-3 was replaced

by the Army's 90mm anti-aircraft weapon.

This excellent M1A1 gun had an increased range and a greater killing power than the M3. It became the standard anti-aircraft artillery piece for the defense and AAA battalions. This gun could fire a 23.4-pound projectile, with a 30-second time fuze out a horizontal distance of 18,890 yards and had a vertical range of 11,273 yards. The 10-man crew could crank off 28 rounds-per-minute. The M1A1 could be towed on its single axle, dual-wheel carriage. It had a distinctive perforated firing platform. The Marine Corps' 90mms generally landed early in an amphibious assault to provide immediate AAA defense at the beachhead. It had a dual role in that it could be directed against ground targets as well.



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Naval Institute

An LST brings the 9th Defense Battalion to Rendova Island, where the unit helped overcome Japanese resistance and then set up its artillery and antiaircraft guns to support the assault on heavily defended neighboring island of New Georgia.

talion, and a detachment from the 11th Defense Battalion secured the Russell Islands as a base for further operations in the Solomons and elsewhere. Seacoast and antiaircraft artillery landed at Banika, and two weeks later, when the Japanese launched their first air strikes, the antiaircraft weapons were ready. The 10th Defense Battalion, under Colonel Robert Blake, arrived on 24 February to reinforce the detachment. The Russells soon became a boomtown—a jerry-built staging area for Allied units arriving in the South Pacific, reorganizing, or moving to other battlegrounds.

The 12th Defense Battalion, commanded by Colonel William H. Harrison, covered the occupation of Woodlark Island, northeast of New Guinea, by Army ground units on 30 June 1943. In just 16 days, Army engineers built an airfield, which the battalion protected until the end of the year. The main purpose of the Woodlark operation was to screen the landings on New Georgia in the central Solomons.

Elements of the 9th, 10th, and 11th

Defense Battalions supported the Army's XIV Corps in the central Solomons campaign. The strongly reinforced 9th Defense Battalion, now commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William J. Scheyer, participated in various aspects of the fighting. The 155mm and antiaircraft artillery groups landed on 30 June at Rendova Island, just off the coast of New Georgia. In the confusion of the Rendova landings, during which the assault waves arrived off schedule and out of sequence, antiaircraft gunners doubled as infantry in eliminating light opposition, and members of the 155mm unit, looking for firing positions, clashed with Japanese patrols. The heavy guns set up and registered in time to support the main landings at New Georgia's Zanana beaches on 2 July. The 90mm antiaircraft guns also were ready that same day, fortunately so, since the Japanese launched the first of 159 air raids carried out during the campaign. The battalion's antiaircraft weapons downed 46 aircraft, including 13 of 16 in one formation. Edmund D. Hadley, serving with the antiaircraft group, helped fight off

one of the heaviest raids. "I will always think of July 4, 1943, as the day the planes fell," he said, his memory sharpened by the fact that he and his 90mm gun crew had to dive into a mud hole to escape a Zero fighter strafing Rendova.

The curtain of antiaircraft fire that protected Rendova and the Zanana beaches had an unintended effect on one of the two secondary landings on New Georgia—Rice Anchorage and Wickham Anchorage. Fragments from antiaircraft shells fired from Rendova rained down upon Rice Anchorage, to the north, where elements of the 11th Defense Battalion guarded a beachhead seized by the Marine 1st Raider Regiment. The commander of a raider battalion recalled setting Condition Red whenever the 90mm guns cut loose on Rendova, for their "shrapnel was screaming in the air above the trees," as it tumbled to earth.

The main landing on Zanana beach, New Georgia, took place on 2 July under the cover of fire from antiaircraft guns and 155mm artillery on Rendova. Machine guns and light antiaircraft weapons promptly



Department of Defense photo (USMC) 58419

Splattered by mud from a near-miss, Marines operating an optical gun director check the equipment for damage as they prepare for the next Japanese air attack on Rendova. On Vella Lavella, Marines downed 42 enemy aircraft in 121 raids.

deployed from Rendova across the narrow strait to New Georgia to help protect the beachhead there. Light tanks from the 9th, 10th, and 11th Defense Battalions helped Army troops punch through the Japanese defenses barring the way to the principal objective, Munda Point airfield. The M3A1 Stuart light tanks and their crews defied jungle, mud, and suicidal counterattacks in spearheading a slow and deliberate attack. The tank gunners fired 37mm canister rounds to strip away the jungle concealing Japanese bunkers, followed up with high-explosive shells to penetrate the fortifications, and used machine guns to cut down the survivors as they fled. Captain Robert W. Blake, a tank commander who earned the Navy Cross in the central Solomons, noted that "death on the Munda Trail" was noisy, violent, and far from romantic. "I trip the seat lever," he wrote, "and drop down behind the periscopic sight. I level the sight dot at the black slot and press the firing switch. Wham, the gun bucks, a wad of smoke billows

through the trees. The concealing branches are left raw and broken." According to one analysis of the fighting, "A handful of Marine tanks, handicapped by difficult jungle, had spearheaded most of the successful attacks on New Georgia."

On 4 August, the Marine tanks that had survived Japanese fire, formidable terrain, and mechanical breakdown, moved onto Munda Point airfield, littered with wrecked airplanes and pockmarked with shell craters. The infantry mopped up on the next day, and the 9th Defense Battalion moved its anti-aircraft weapons into position to protect the captured airdrome, while its 155mm guns prepared to shell the Japanese garrison on nearby Kolombangara.

The 4th Defense Battalion covered a landing by Army forces on 15 August at Vella Lavella, the north-westernmost island in the central Solomons. The battalion's anti-aircraft weapons, concentrated near Barakoma harbor, shot down 42 Japanese aircraft during 121 raids. Attempts to land cargo elsewhere on

the island, and thus speed the distribution of supplies, triggered a savage reaction from Japanese air power. Speed proved less important than security, and after the sinking of an LST on 1 October, 1 Marine Amphibious Corps directed that all ships would unload at Barakoma under an anti-aircraft shield provided by the 4th Defense Battalion.

The tank platoons of the 9th, 10th, and 11th Defense Battalions—veterans of the conquest of New Georgia—boarded landing craft and sailed due west to Arundel Island, where Army troops landed on 27 August. As had happened during the earlier capture of Munda Point, the Stuart tanks used their 37mm guns to breach a succession of defensive positions, suffering steady attrition in the process. On 19 September, all the surviving armor formed two ranks, the rear covering the front rank, which plunged ahead, firing 37mm canister to strip away the jungle concealment as the tanks gouged paths for advancing soldiers. This charge proved to be the last major

fight during the conquest of Arundel Island.

On 1 November 1943, the offensive reached the northern Solomons, as the recently organized 3d Marine Division landed at Bougainville. The 3d Defense Battalion, led by Lieutenant Colonel Edward H. Forney, followed the first waves ashore and had heavy machine guns and light anti-aircraft guns ready for action by nightfall. The battalion organized both anti-aircraft and beach defenses, taking advantage of the dual capabilities of the 90mm gun to destroy Japanese landing barges on the Laruma River. The 155mm artillery group supported Marine raiders and parachutists at Koiari and joined the 12th Marines, the 3d Marine Division's artillery regiment, in shelling Japanese positions at Torokina. The defense battalion would remain at Bougainville into the following year, earning the dubious honor of being "the last Fleet Marine Force ground unit" to be withdrawn from the Solomons.

Colonel William H. Harrison's 12th Defense Battalion supported the

The 9th Defense Battalion deployed light anti-aircraft guns, as this Bofors 40mm weapon, in the Solomons on Rendova and



Department of Defense photo (USMC) 60625

The 90mm anti-aircraft guns on Rendova, as this one, threw up a barrier of fire to protect the troops attacking Munda airfield from enemy air raids and, in doing so, showered shell fragments on the Marines across New Georgia at Rice Anchorage.

landing of the 1st Marine Division at Cape Gloucester, New Britain, in December 1943. The lodgment on New Britain marked the end of the Rabaul campaign—and of participation by major Marine Corps units in the South and Southwest Pacific—for the United States had decided to isolate and bypass the fortress instead of storming it. Radar operator Vic-

tor C. Bond, a member of Harrison's battalion at Cape Gloucester, remembered sitting on the exposed "plow seat" of an SCR-268, with 90mm guns barking nearby. "During an air raid," he said, "it was difficult to tell if all the noise and smoke was due to the 90mms or the enemy."

On New Britain, the 12th Defense Battalion suffered most of its casual-

New Georgia, both to protect the Zanana beachhead and to support the accelerating advance against the Munda airfield.

Department of Defense photo (USMC) 60095 by TSgt Jeremiah Sarno



Antiaircraft Machine Guns

A number of "light" antiaircraft artillery weapons and "heavy" machine guns were placed in the weapons groups of the defense battalions to provide close-in defense against low-flying aircraft.

These weapons were flexibly employed and landed found on the beach with the assault waves. They were designated dual-purpose weapons as they were used against both air and surface targets. While organized into batteries by weapons' types, light antiaircraft weapons were often attached to task-organized teams.

The Bofors-designed 37mm and 40mm automatic guns were the backbones of these teams. The M1 40mm antiaircraft gun became the standard piece by July 1942. It was manufactured by Blaw-Knox, Chrysler, and York Safe & Lock in the United States. The M1 was recoil operated and designed for use against aircraft and could serve as an antitank weapon. It fired 1.96-pound shells at a rate of 120-per-minute with a maximum range of over four miles. Its M2 carriage had electric brakes and bullet-resistant tires, was towed at up to 50 miles an hour, and could be put in firing position within 25 seconds. Easily operated and maintained, the 40mm gun was credited with 50 percent of the enemy aircraft destroyed by antiaircraft weapons accord-

ing to statistics gathered between 1944 and 1945. Another light weapon in the defense battalion arsenal was the Oerlikon 20mm antiaircraft gun. It was made in the United States by Oerlikon-Gazda, Pontiac Motors, and Hudson Motor Car. These were Navy Mark 2 and Mark 4 weapons, first used on static pedestal mounts, but later mounted in pairs on wheeled carriages as a high-speed 'twin twenty.'

It was a simple blowback-operated gun capable of being put into action quicker than larger caliber weapons. It fired explosive, armor-piercing, and incendiary projectiles at a rate of 450 rounds a minute out to a maximum range of 4,800 yards. Mobility, reliability, and high volume of fire enabled it to account for 32 percent of identified antiaircraft shot down during the 1942 to 1944 period.

Finally, the battalions were liberally equipped with heavy .30- and .50-caliber machine guns. The Browning M2 water-cooled machine gun was used on an M2 mount as an antiaircraft weapon by special weapons groups to help defend artillery and antiaircraft artillery positions. The Browning M1917 water-cooled machine gun was used for ground and beach defense with crews made up from defense battalion personnel in contingencies.

ties from typhus and other diseases, falling trees, and lightning. "There is no jungle in the world worse than in southwestern New Britain," a member of the 1st Marine Division declared. The effort to limit the ef-

fects of malaria, prevalent in the swamps and rain forest, involved the use of atabrine, a substitute for scarce quinine. The remedy required hard selling by medical personnel and commanders to convince dubious

Marines to take a bitter-tasting medicine that was rumored to turn skin yellow and make users sterile. In a moment of whimsy, Second Lieutenant Gerald A. Waindel suggested adapting a slogan used to sell coffee

Each Japanese flag painted on this 3d Defense Battalion 40mm gun on Bougainville represents a Japanese plane shot down.
Department of Defense photo (USMC) 74010





Department of Defense photo (USMC) 71623

The light anti-aircraft artillery of the 12th Defense Battalion on the deck of an LST approaching Cape Gloucester, New Britain, is poised to fire on Japanese aircraft.

back in the United States: "Atabrine — Good to the last drop."

In March 1944, a detachment from the 14th Defense Battalion landed at Emirau, St. Mathias Islands, in support of its occupation by Army troops. Technical Sergeant George H. Mattie reported that "the Marines sent some troops ashore, met no opposition, and in a matter of days the Seabees ripped up the jungle" for an airfield. The deadliest things about duty at Emirau, Mattie remembered, were "boredom and loneliness." Other detachments from the 14th Defense Battalion supported the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing's occupation of Green Island, the coup de grace for bypassed Japanese forces at Rabaul and throughout the Bismarck Archipelago. The use of Green Island as an air base for hammering the bypassed stronghold of Rabaul signaled the attainment of the final rung in the so-called Solomons Ladder, which began at Guadalcanal and required the services of three Marine divisions, two Marine aircraft wings, and a variety of special units, including the defense battalions. In a year and a half of fighting, the Marines —

along with soldiers and sailors — had not taken any "real, honest-to-God towns," just "grass shacks and lizards and swamp 'gardens' of slimy banyan trees."

As the campaign against Japan gathered momentum, defense battalions on outlying islands like the Ellice group, Samoa, Johnston, Palmyra, and Midway found themselves increasingly in the backwash of war, struggling with boredom rather than fighting an armed enemy. Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift, former commanding general of the 1st Marine Division and since July 1943 the commander of I Marine Amphibious Corps, noticed the fragile morale of some of the defense battalions, as did his chief of staff, Colonel Gerald C. Thomas, during their inspection tour of the Solomon Islands. "The war had gone beyond them," recalled Thomas, and a number of the junior field-grade officers were "pleading just to get into the war" and out of the defense battalions. As a result, some 35 officers received transfers to the Command and Staff College at Quantico, Virginia, for future assignments to corps

or division headquarters. The problem of the future of the defense battalions in a changing situation remained unresolved when the year 1944 began.

Fighting Boredom

One technique used by a defense battalion's communications specialists in the battle against boredom consisted of eavesdropping on the radio nets used by the fighter pilots. The chatter among aviators, though discouraged by commanders, rivaled the dialogue in the adventure serials broadcast in late afternoon back in the United States — radio shows such as *Captain Midnight* or *Hop Harrigan*. First Lieutenant William K. Holt remembered hearing cries of: "I'm Deadeye Dick, I never miss"; or, borrowing directly from a yet another radio serial, "Here comes Jack Armstrong, the all-American boy." Imitations of machine gun fire punctuated the commentary.

By the end of 1943, as the program reached its peak wartime strength, 19 defense battalions had been organized. One of the early units, the 5th Defense Battalion, was redesignated as the 14th Defense Battalion, so that the 19 units accounted for 20 numbers. At the peak of the program, 26,685 Marines and sailors served in the 19 defense battalions, a figure that does not include the various replacement drafts that kept them at or near authorized strength. Since a Marine division in 1943 required some 19,000 officers and enlisted men, the pool of experienced persons assigned to the defense battalions made these units a target for reorganization and consolidation as the war approached a climax.

The Central Pacific Drive

Defense battalions supported the attack by V Amphibious Corps across the Central Pacific, an offensive that began in November 1943 with the storming of two main objectives, Makin and Tarawa, in the Gilbert Islands. Long-range bombers



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Naval Institute

In the jungle, Marines found no towns, few villages, and fewer permanent buildings to commandeer for shelter. As a result, the men of the defense battalions lived in pup tents and, when rain was not falling, took catnaps on uncomfortable surfaces.

based in the Ellice Islands helped prepare the atolls for the impending assault, and the 5th and 7th Defense Battalions protected the bases these aircraft used from retaliatory air strikes by the Japanese.

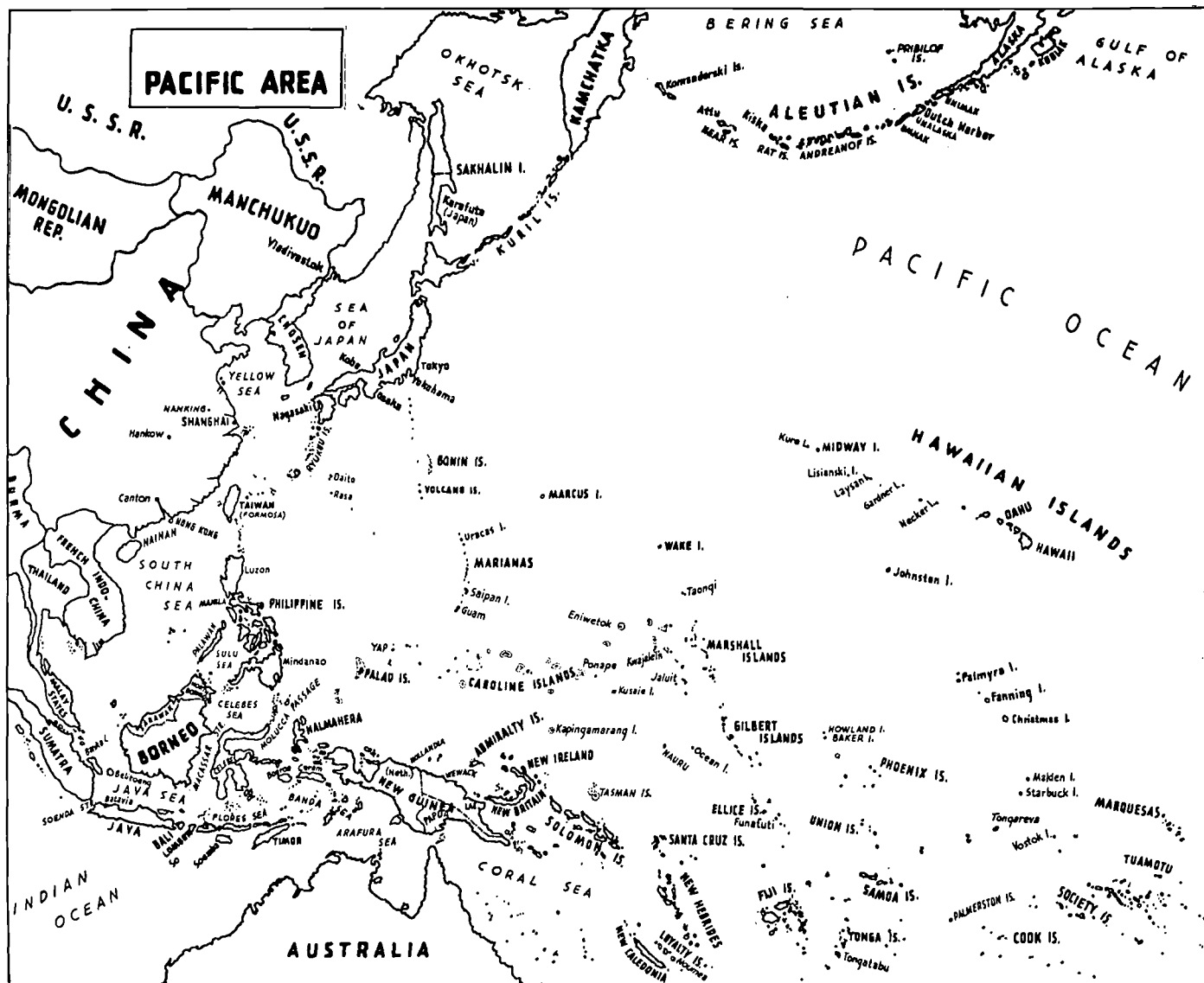
In the bloodiest fighting of the Gilberts operation, the 2d Marine Division stormed Betio Island in Tarawa Atoll on 20 November and overwhelmed the objective within four days. On 24 November, the last day of the fighting, Colonel Norman E. True's 2d Defense Battalion relieved the assault units that had captured Betio. The defense battalion set up guns and searchlights to protect the airstrip on Betio—repaired and named Hawkins Field after First Lieutenant William D. Hawkins, one of the 2d Marine Division's heroes killed in the battle—and another airfield built by Seabees at adjacent Bonkiri. The defenders emplaced radar and searchlights to guard against night bombing raids,

employing a combination of radar-directed and free-lance searchlights that could pick up approaching aircraft at a slant range of 60,000 feet. Between November 1943 and January 1944, the Japanese hurled 19 air raids against True's battalion, along with numerous harassing raids by lone airplanes known as "Washing-Machine Charlie." Only once did the enemy escape detection. According to one of the unit's officers, Captain John V. Alden, the Japanese raiders usually aimed for the airfields, often mistaking the beach for the runways at night and, in one instance, hitting gun positions on the coast of Bairiki.

On 28 November 1943, the 8th Defense Battalion, commanded by Colonel Lloyd L. Leech, went ashore at Apamama, an atoll in the Gilberts captured with a minimum of casualties, to relieve the Marine assault force that had landed there. Apamama lay just 80 miles from blood-drenched Tarawa, but for First Lieu-

tenant James G. Lucas, a Marine Corps combat correspondent, it was "difficult to imagine they were in the same world." Japanese bombers from the Marshall Islands sometimes raided Apamama, recalled Sergeant David N. Austin of the anti-aircraft group, and one moonlit night the gunners "fired 54 rounds before the cease-fire came over the phone."

The bold thrust through the Gilberts penetrated the outermost ring of Japanese defenses in the Central Pacific. The next objectives lay in the Marshall Islands, where in a fast-paced series of assaults V Amphibious Corps used Marine reconnaissance troops and Army infantry to attack Majuro on 30 January 1944 and, immediately afterward, two objectives in Kwajalein Atoll. The 4th Marine Division assaulted Roi-Namur—actually two islets joined by a causeway—on the 31st, and an Army infantry division landed at Kwajalein Island on 1 February. A



mixed force of Marines and soldiers stormed Eniwetok Atoll, at the western limit of the Marshall group, on 17 February. Those who watched from shipboard off Roi-Namur saw "pillars of greasy smoke billow upward." This awesome sight convinced an eyewitness, Master Technical Sergeant David Dempsey, a combat correspondent, that the preliminary bombardment by aircraft and naval guns must have blasted the objective to oblivion, but somehow the Japanese emerged from the shattered bunkers and fought back.

The 1st Defense Battalion, under Colonel Lewis A. Hohn, and the 15th, led by Lieutenant Colonel Francis B. Loomis, arrived in the Marshalls and initially emplaced their weapons at Roi-Namur and Majuro. On Roi, the defenders set up anti-air-

craft guns in some of the 50 or more craters gouged in the Japanese runways by American bombs and shells. Machine gunner Ed Gough recalled that his special weapons group came ashore "on the first or second day," remaining "through the first air raid when the Japanese succeeded in kicking our ass." The enemy could not, however, overcome the anti-aircraft defenses, and calm settled over the captured Marshalls. Marines from the defense battalions helped islanders displaced by the war to return to Roi-Namur, where, upon coming home, they helped bury the enemy dead and clear the wreckage from a "three-quarter-square-mile junk yard." Tractors, trucks, and jeeps ground ceaselessly across the airfield on Roi bringing in construction material for new installations and

removing the rubble.

Colonel Hohn's battalion moved on to Kwajalein Island and Eniwetok Atoll by the end of January, and Lieutenant Colonel Wallace O. Thompson's 10th Defense Battalion joined them on 21 February. The victory in the Marshalls advanced the Pacific battle lines 2,500 miles closer to Japan.

Far to the south, the African-American 51st Defense Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Curtis W. LeGette, landed at the Ellice Islands in February 1944. One glance at the isolated chain of desolate islands suggested that the white Marines of the departing 7th Defense Battalion "were never so glad to see black people" in their lives. The 51st took over airfield defense and engaged in gun drills and practice

alerts, finally firing on a radar return from a suspected surfaced Japanese submarine on 28 March. The 51st assumed responsibility for defending Eniwetok in September, replacing the 10th Defense Battalion, but actual combat continued to elude the black Marines despite unceasing preparation.

Signs of the Times

Once established ashore in the Gilberts and Marshalls, the defense battalions rarely, if ever, faced the threat of marauding Japanese ships or aircraft. As the active battlefields moved closer to Japan, the phenomenon of sign-painting took hold. One of them summarized the increasing isolation of the defense battalions from the fury of the island war. "Shady Acres Rifle and Gun Club," read the sign, "Where Life Is a 155mm Bore." Such was the forgotten war on the little islands, described as "almost microscopic in the incredible vastness of the Pacific;" which became stops on the supply lines that sustained other Marines fighting hundreds of miles away. According to one observer, the captured atolls served as "stopovers for the long, gray convoys heading westward," though some of them also became fixed aircraft carriers for bombing the by-passed enemy bases. While the defense battalions prepared for attacks that did not come, a relatively small number of airmen harassed thousands of Japanese left behind in the Marshall and Caroline Islands.

Reorienting the Defense Battalion

At Marine Corps headquarters, General Vandegrift, now the Commandant, faced a problem of using scarce manpower to the greatest possible effect. Vandegrift's director of the Division of Plans and Policies, Gerald C. Thomas, promoted to brigadier general, received instructions to maintain six divisions and four aircraft wings, plus corps troops



Department of Defense photo (USN)

As this sign on Majuro indicates, the advance in the Pacific war to this atoll in the Marshall Islands had many interesting and challenging stops along the way.

and a service establishment—all without a substantial increase in aggregate strength. Most of the men that Thomas needed already were undergoing training, but he also recommended eliminating special units, including the defense battalions. Abolishing the defense battalions promised to be difficult, however, for the Navy Department felt it would need as many as 29 battalions to protect advance bases. General Vandegrift exercised his powers of persuasion on Admiral Ernest J. King, the Chief of Naval Operations, and talked the naval officer into agreeing not only to form no new defense battalions but also to accept deactivation of two of the existing 19 units, while reorienting the 17 survivors to meet the current

threat. The process began in April 1944, and five months later, the defense battalions that began the year had converted to antiaircraft artillery units, though a few retained their old designation, and in rare instances the 155mm artillery group remained with a battalion as an attachment rather than an integral component.

A new table of organization appeared in July 1944 and reflected the emphasis on 90mm and 40mm antiaircraft weapons, though it left the manpower level all but unchanged. The document called for a battalion of 57 officers and 1,198 enlisted men, organized into a headquarters and service battery, a heavy antiaircraft group, a light antiaircraft group, and a searchlight battery. Only three

Coast and Field Artillery

The first defense battalions were equipped with 5-inch/51-caliber naval guns which were originally designed for shipboard mounting and later extensively modified for use ashore. These weapons were then emplaced in static positions, but with great difficulty. The guns fired high explosive, armor piercing, and chemical shells.

Initially, the defense battalions were issued the standard M1918 155mm "GPF" guns, which had split trails, single axles, and twin wheels. These World War I relics deployed

to the South Pacific with the defense battalions. Later, the battalions were issued standard M1A1 155mm "Long Tom" guns. This piece weighed 30,600 pounds, had a split trail and eight pneumatic tires, was pulled by tractor, and was served by a combined crew of 15 men. It was pedestal mounted on the so-called "Panama" mount for its seacoast defense role. It combined great firepower with high mobility and proved to be a workhorse that remained in the inventory after World War II.

units retained the designation of defense battalion until they disbanded—the 6th, the 51st, and the 52d. In the end, most of the defense battalions became antiaircraft artillery outfits and functioned under the Fleet Marine Force, Pacific.

While these changes were taking place, defense battalions participated in the final phase of the Central Pacific campaign—three successive landings in the Mariana Islands by V Amphibious Corps and III Amphibious Corps, and the destruction by American carrier pilots of the naval air arm that Japan had reconstituted in the two years since the Battle of Midway. In the Marianas,

the Marines stormed large islands, with broken terrain overgrown by jungle, a battlefield far different from the compact, low-lying coral outcroppings of the Gilberts and Marshalls. The Marianas group also differed from the recently captured atolls in that the larger islands had a sizable civilian populace that had lived in towns flattened by bombs and artillery.

On 15 June 1944, the conquest of the Marianas began when V Amphibious Corps attacked Saipan with the 2d and 4th Marine Divisions, backed by the Army's 27th Infantry Division. The 17th Defense Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel Tho-

mas G. McFarland, reached Saipan in July, where the 18th Defense Battalion, led by Lieutenant Colonel William J. Van Ryzin, joined it and became part of the island garrison. Although Saipan was by now officially secure, danger from various tropical maladies persisted. After a briefing on the island's innumerable health hazards, Technical Sergeant John B. T. Campbell heard a private ask the medical officer "Sir, why don't we just let the Japs keep the island?"

On 24 July, Marines boarded landing craft on Saipan and sailed directly to Tinian, the second objective in the Mariana Islands. McFarland's battalion landed at Tinian in August and

On drab, desolate Eniwetok, the 10th Defense Battalion test fires a 155mm gun out across an empty ocean. Despite the

lack of threat of any immediate enemy attack, the weapon was camouflaged just in case Japanese planes flew over.

Department of Defense photo (USN)





Photo courtesy of the U.S. Naval Institute

A violent barrage from the 12th Defense Battalion greets attacking Japanese aircraft over Cape Gloucester, New Britain. As the danger from Japanese surface ships diminished, the defense battalions became concerned with Japanese air raids.

devoted its energy to building and improving gun positions, roads, and living areas. The battalion's historian, Charles L. Henry, Jr., recalled that "round-the-clock patrols were still a necessity, with many Japanese still on the island." Skirmishes erupted almost daily, as Marines from the battalion "cleaned up the island." The 18th Defense Battalion moved from Saipan to Tinian, where the 16th Defense Battalion joined it in September to help protect the new airfields.

On 21 July 1944, the 9th Defense Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Archie E. O'Neil, and the 14th, under Lieutenant Colonel William F. Parks, landed on Guam. The two units served with distinction in the recapture of the island by the 3d Marine Division, 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, and the Army's 77th Infantry Division under the overall control of III Amphibious Corps. The 9th Defense Battalion supported the Marine brigade at Agat Bay, and the 14th protected the 3d Marine Division on the Red Beaches, where

it landed under intense fire, prepared the beachhead defenses, set up anti-aircraft guns, and later helped rescue civilians made homeless by the war. An account prepared by the 3d Marine Division related that, although Guam was secured rapidly, "the fighting was not over" by August, for more than 10,000 disorganized Japanese stragglers held out in the northern part of the island until they fell victim to "the long,

The fire from Marine anti-aircraft gunners defending the Saipan beachhead against a Japanese night air attack makes interesting "4th of July" patterns in the sky.

Department of Defense photo (USCG)



grueling process of mopping up." Both defense battalions also bore the twin burdens of working as laborers and doubling as infantry in searching out the Japanese and killing or capturing them.

The captured Mariana Islands demonstrated their strategic value in November 1944, when Boeing B-29s based there began the systematic bombing of targets in Japan's Home Islands. From the outset, Marine anti-aircraft gunners helped defend these airfields. Eventually, the African-American 52d Defense Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel David W. Silvey, reached the Marianas after service at Roi-Namur and Eniwetok, where it had replaced the 1st and 15th battalions. The 52d set up its anti-aircraft weapons on Guam in the spring of 1945, patrolling for Japanese stragglers and providing working parties. The emphasis on labor caused one noncommissioned officer to observe that instead of "being a defense unit, we turned out to be nothing more than a working battalion," a complaint that members of other defense battalions would echo.

Despite constant patrolling and frequent clashes with the die-hard Japanese, duty in the Marianas became a matter of routine. The same pattern prevailed throughout the captured Gilberts and Marshalls, as well. Aviation units manned the airfields;



Department of Defense photo (USMC) 93063

Marines of Battery 1, 14th Defense Battalion, man their twin-barrelled, Mark IV, Oerlikon-designed 20mm guns on top of Chonito Ridge overlooking Adelup Point. In the initial stages of the Guam operation, these anti-aircraft guns were in support.

anti-aircraft gunners peered into an empty sky, hoping the enemy would appear; those members of defense battalions not otherwise employed wrestled cargo between ship's holds and dumps ashore; and Seabees sweated over construction projects.

While the Central Pacific campaign moved through the Gilberts, Marshalls, and Marianas, the 1st Marine Division, after wresting control of New Britain and isolating Rabaul,

prepared to seize Peleliu in the Palau Islands to protect MacArthur's flank as he reentered the Philippines. The division landed on 15 September 1944, triggering a bloody battle that tied down the bulk of the division until mid-October. Army troops did not crush the last organized Japanese resistance until the end of November. During the bitter fighting on Peleliu, the 12th Defense Battalion, now redesignated an anti-aircraft artillery

unit, supported the Marine division while it fought to conquer the island. Also present on Peleliu – described as “the most heavily fortified ground, square yard by square yard, Marines have ever assaulted” – was the light anti-aircraft group of the 4th Anti-aircraft Artillery (formerly Defense) Battalion. The 7th Defense Battalion, now an anti-aircraft outfit, worked with the Army's 81st Infantry Division on Anguar, remaining there after the soldiers took over the fighting on Peleliu.

The Marine anti-aircraft gunners at Peleliu dug in on what was described as “an abrupt spine of jagged ridges and cliffs – jutting dragon-tooth crags, bare and black, where Marine infantrymen fought maniacal Japs.” As the fury of the fighting abated, the 7th Battalion transferred personnel and equipment to the 12th, which – according to its logistics officer, Harry M. Parke – received newer material and “men with less time overseas,” who would not become eligible to return home when the units began preparing for the invasion of Japan.

By the end of 1944, with Peleliu and the Marianas firmly in American hands, 74,474 Marines and sailors served in island garrisons and

An optical gun director is manned by Marines from one of the defense battalions participating in the Peleliu operation.

Fortunately for the attacking 1st Division Marines, no enemy air appeared overhead to hazard the ground operations.

Department of Defense photo (USMC) 97571





Department of Defense photo (USMC) 97570

This Army-developed SCR-584 radar took over the work of the optical gun director on Peleliu, to provide automatic target tracking and gun laying for the Marines.

base defense forces. As the defense battalion program focused on anti-aircraft weapons, defense units—most of them by now redesignated as anti-aircraft artillery outfits—served in Hawaii (the 13th at Oahu with the Fleet Marine Force, Pacific; the 8th on Kauai with Fleet Marine Force, Pacific; and the 2d, 5th, 7th, and 16th with V Amphibious Corps) and at Midway (the 6th). In the Southwest Pacific, battalions were

stationed at Guadalcanal (the 3d and 4th with III Amphibious Corps), the Russell Islands (the 12th with III Amphibious Corps), and the Ellice Group (the 51st). Locations in the Central Pacific included Eniwetok (the 10th with V Amphibious Corps), Guam (the 9th and 14th with III Amphibious Corps), Majuro (the 1st with V Amphibious Corps), Roi-Namur (the 15th with V Amphibious Corps), and Saipan (the 17th and

18th with V Amphibious Corps). The 52d Defense Battalion, which would reach Guam in the spring of 1945, stood guard at Majuro and Kwajalein Atolls.

Tributes to the Defense Battalions

Master Technical Sergeant Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., a Marine combat correspondent, wrote in 1944 that “since the beginning of the war many of the men . . . had seen action in units smaller than divisions—in defense and raider battalions and other special commands.” These Marines “had been fighting for a long time,” he said. *Leatherneck*, a magazine published by and for Marines, predicted in September 1944 that not until the war was won would the complete story of each defense battalion be told. Because of the vital part they played, “much information about them . . . must be withheld, but there are no American troops with longer combat records in this war.”

Pacific Victory

MacArthur’s advance from the Southwest Pacific by way of the Philippines and Nimitz’s Central Pa-

Fire Control

A combination of conventional optical sights, coincidence range finders, sound locaters, primitive radar sets, and searchlights comprised the fire control equipment in the early defense battalions. As the war progressed in the Pacific, most of these items were modified and improved.

The Sperry 60-inch searchlight fired up a 800-million-candlepower light beam with a slant range of 20,000 yards. Originally intended for illuminating ships at sea, the Sperry was soon employed in finding and tracking enemy aircraft overhead. The searchlights were also used to direct night fighters to intercept enemy

planes, to guide friendly aircraft back to their bases, and in support of ground forces as their beams were reflected off of low cloud cover in order to illuminate the battlefield.

Searchlights, radar, and sound detectors worked in conjunction with gun directors to convert tracking information into firing data. Gun directors functioned as computers in providing the trigonometric solutions which predicted flight paths and furnishing fuze settings for the anti-aircraft artillery. The input of height finders combined with information about the azimuth and elevation of the targets also was fed to remotely controlled 40mm and 90mm anti-aircraft guns.

The radar and fire control equipment employed by the defense battalions in turn allowed them to become an integral part of the overall air defense of a captured target area. Although dispersed throughout the beachhead, this equipment was linked primarily by telephone with a radio backup. A battalion fire control center coordinated the operations of each group of weapons and in turn was incorporated with other Allied radar nets. The effective ranges for fire control equipment was variously 20-45 miles for fire control gear and 120-200 miles for search radar.



Tracers fired by the 5th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion—formerly the 5th Defense Battalion—light up the night skies

Department of Defense photo (USMC) 08087 by TSgt C.V. Corkran
over Okinawa during a Japanese air attack. A Marine fighter squadron's Corsairs are silhouetted against the spectacle.

cific campaign aimed ultimately at the invasion of the Japanese Home Islands. To prepare for the climactic battles, the 2d, 5th, 8th, and 16th Antiaircraft Artillery (formerly Defense) Battalions formed the 1st Provisional Antiaircraft Artillery Group. The group did not see action at Iwo Jima in February 1945, but at Okinawa, the final objective before the projected attack on Japan, it came under the operational control of the Tenth Army's 53d Antiaircraft Artillery Brigade.

The Marine and Army divisions of the Tenth Army landed across the Okinawa beaches on 1 April 1945. On the 13th, the first echelon of the newly redesignated 8th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion arrived at recently captured Nago, near the neck of Okinawa's Motobu Peninsula, to conduct "normal AA [antiaircraft]

defense operations." James H. Powers recalled that the battalion got credit for a Mitsubishi G4M bomber (nicknamed "Betty" by the Allies) and also helped secure a defensive perimeter against Japanese stragglers "making trouble in our vicinity." The 5th battalion set up in the Yontan-Kadena area by 6 May, where it received credit for making one kill and assisting in another. These antiaircraft battalions demonstrated that they had learned, in the six years since the first of the defense battalions was formed in 1939, to make good use of weapons, communications gear, and radar.

Technical Sergeant John Worth told of a Marine officer looking for firing positions and living quarters for his battery in one of the antiaircraft artillery battalions. The officer located a cave, free of booby traps,

that would provide adequate shelter, but he had to keep some other unit from taking it. To enforce his claim, he put up a sign: "Booby Traps. Keep Away." After he left to report his discovery and deploy the unit, a demolitions man saw the sign and, blew up the cave, sealing it shut.

Japanese air attacks attained unprecedented savagery in the waters off Okinawa, as the *Special Attack Corps* pressed home the suicidal kamikaze attacks first employed in the Philippines. Hoping to save Japan—much as a storm, the original *Kamikaze* or divine wind, had scattered a Mongol invasion fleet in the sixteenth century—the suicide pilots deliberately dived into American ships, hoping to trade one life for hundreds. Other vehicles for suicide attack included piloted bombs,



Marine Corps Historical Collection

The 13th Defense Battalion passes in review at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in 1943. Marine historian and veteran defense battalion Marine Col Robert D. Heinl, Jr., described the men of

these battalions, who often endured months of waiting punctuated by days of savage action, as a "hard worked and frustrated species." The 13th was shortly to deploy to the Pacific

manned torpedoes, and explosives-laden motorboats. These desperate measures could not prevail, however, and the United States seized an essential base for the planned invasion of Japan.

In the Marianas, Marines on Tinian witnessed the takeoff on 6 August of the B-29 *Enola Gay*, which dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Three days later, another B-29, also from Tinian's North Field, dropped a second atomic bomb on Nagasaki. The shock of the atomic weapons, the entry of the Soviet Union into the war against Japan, the cumulative effects of attrition throughout the vast Pacific, months of conventional bombing of the Home Islands, and an ever-tightening submarine blockade forced Japan to surrender. Members of the 8th An-

tiaircraft Artillery Battalion on Okinawa recall tracking the last air attack of the war, a raid that turned back short of the target when the Japanese government agreed to surrender. The formal cessation of hostilities, effective 15 August 1945, also put an end to the systematic mopping-up in northern Okinawa. The dour prediction of the early days in the South Pacific, "Golden Gate in '48," gave way to a new slogan, "Home Alive in '45." The actual homecoming would be delayed, however, for those Marines scheduled for occupation duty in Japan or North China.

Gone But Not Forgotten

Defense battalions deployed early and often throughout the Pacific campaigns, serving in a succession of

distant places, some dangerous, others boring. They did not benefit from post-battle rest—though few rest areas lived up to their name—nor were their accommodations comparable to those of an aircraft wing sharing the same location. The Marines of the defense battalions endured isolation, sickness, monotonous food, and primitive living conditions for long periods, as they engaged in the onerous task of protecting advance bases in areas that by no stretch of the imagination resembled tropical paradises. After putting up with these conditions for months, many of these same Marines went on to serve as replacements in the six Marine divisions in action when the war ended.

Throughout their existence, the defense battalions demonstrated a

Armor and Support

While defense battalions could defend themselves with small arms and machine guns, they lacked maneuver elements which, in turn, made them vulnerable when deployed independently of other ground forces. In 1941, the Marine Corps decided not to form separate infantry units to support the defense battalions. For the most part, they would have to depend upon the infantry elements with which they landed in an

amphibious assault. In some cases, however, infantry, armor, and artillery support was provided to reinforce defense battalions in certain operations. During the Pacific War, provisional rifle companies were formed and assigned to the 6th, 7th, 51st, and 52d Defense Battalions, and tank platoons were assigned at various times to the 9th, 10th, and 11th Defense Battalions.

fundamental lesson of the Pacific War—the need for teamwork. As one Marine Corps officer has pointed out, the Marine Corps portion of the victorious American team was “itself the embodiment of unification.” The Corps had “molded itself into the team concept without the slightest difficulty . . . Marine tank men, artillerymen, and antiaircraft gunners of the defense battalions, interested only in doing a good job, gave equal support to . . . [the] Army and Navy

Relations with other combat services, arms, and units defined the role of the defense battalions in the Pacific, for they functioned as a part of a combined effort at sea, in the air, and on the ground. During the war, there were examples of independent deployment, as at Wake Island and Midway. It was equally common, however, for battalions or their components to serve with brigades or divisions, as at Iceland, Samoa, or Guadalcanal, or to operate under corps-level commands, as at New Georgia. Finally, especially after the transition to antiaircraft artillery battalions, the units tended to perform base-defense or garrison duty under the Fleet Marine Force, Pacific. The shift of the defense battalions from fighting front to backwater of the war reflected changing strategic reality and not an arbitrary decision to deemphasize. Some of the Marines in these units may have felt that the spotlight of publicity passed them by and focused on the assault troops, even though antiaircraft gunners and even artillerymen sometimes accompanied the early waves to an embattled beachhead, but the apportionment of press coverage stemmed from the composition of the Marine Corps and the nature of the fighting.

Because the defense battalion could train and serve as an essentially independent organization, it became a logical choice for the first African-American unit formed by the Marines. Although segregation prevailed

in the Corps throughout World War II, the creation of the 51st and 52d Defense Battalions signaled a break with racist practices and became a milestone on the road toward today's racially integrated Marine Corps.

Colonel Robert D. Heinl, Jr., a Marine historian who had helped shape the concept of the defense battalion and served in one of the wartime units, described the members as a “hard-worked and frustrated species.” He felt that the defense battalions represented the culmination of Marine Corps thinking that could trace its evolutionary course back to the turn of the century. The weapons, radars, and communications equipment in the battalions at times represented the cutting edge of wartime technology, and the skill with which they were used paid tribute to the training and discipline of the members of these units. Charles A. Holmes, a veteran of the defense battalion that fought so gallantly at Wake Island, said that, in his opinion, anyone could serve somewhere in a division or aircraft wing, but “it was an honor to have served in a special unit of the U.S. Marines.”

Battalion Summaries

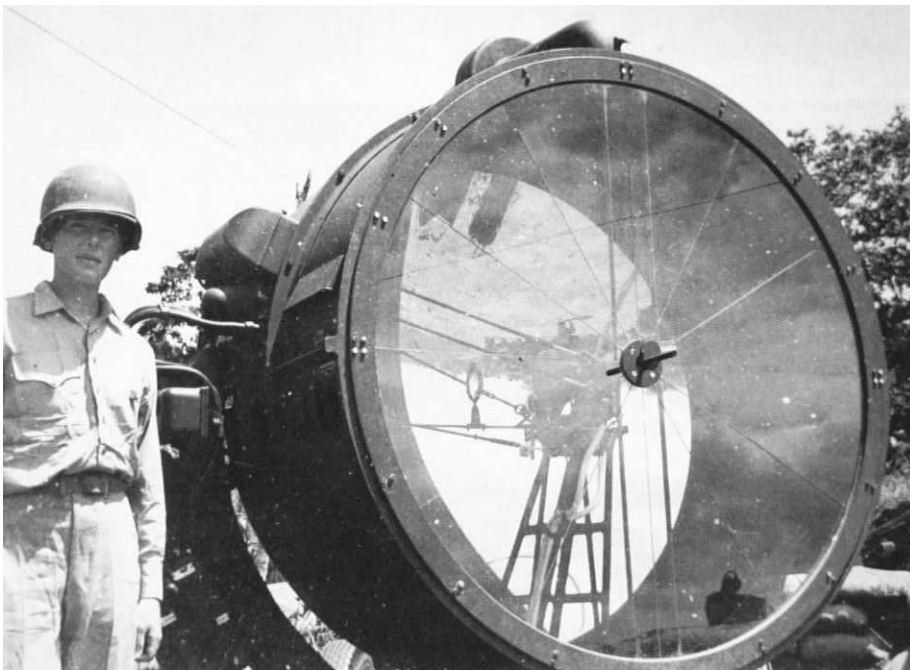
Defense battalion war diaries, muster rolls, and the unit files held by the Marine Corps Historical Center provide the basis for the following brief accounts of the service of the various defense battalions. The actions of some units are well documented: for example, the 1st Defense Battalion on Wake Island in 1941; the 6th at Midway in 1942; and the 9th in the Central Solomons during 1943. Few of the battalions received group recognition commensurate with their contributions to victory, although the 1st, 6th, and 9th were awarded unit citations. Each defense battalion created its own distinctive record as it moved from one island to another, but gaps and discrepancies persist nevertheless.

1st Defense Battalion (November 1939-May 1944)

The unit, formed at San Diego, California, deployed to the Pacific as one of the Rainbow Five, the five defense battalions stationed there in accordance with the Rainbow 5 war plan when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Under Lieutenant Colonel Bert A. Bone, elements of the battalion arrived in Hawaii in March 1941. The unit provided defense detachments for Johnston and Palmyra Islands in March and April of that year and for Wake Island in August. The Wake Island detachment of the 1st Defense Battalion received the Presidential Unit Citation for the defense of that outpost—which earned the battalion the nickname “Wake Island Defenders”—and other elements dealt with hit-and-run raids at Palmyra and Johnston Islands. In March 1942, the scattered detachments became garrison forces and a reconstituted battalion took shape in Hawaii. Command passed to Colonel Curtis W. LeGette in May 1942 and to Lieutenant Colonel John H. Griebel in September. Lieutenant Colonel Frank P. Hager exercised command briefly; his successor, Colonel Lewis H. Hohn, took the unit to Kwajalein and Eniwetok, in the Marshall Islands, in February 1944. The following month found the battalion on Majuro, also in the Marshalls, where it became the 1st Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion on 7 May 1944, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Jean H. Buckner. As an antiaircraft unit, it served as part of the Guam garrison, remaining on the island through 1947.

2d Defense Battalion (March 1940-April 1944)

The battalion was formed at San Diego, California, under Lieutenant Colonel Bert A. Bone. By the time the unit deployed to Hawaii in December 1941, five officers had exercised command; Major Lewis A. Hohn took over from Colonel Bone in July 1940, followed in August of that year by Colonel Thomas E. Bourke, in November 1940 by Lieutenant Colonel Charles I. Murray, and in February 1941 by Lieutenant Colonel Raymond E. Knapp. Under Knapp, who received a promotion to colonel, the battalion deployed in January 1942 from Hawaii to Tutuila, Samoa. Lieutenant Colonel Norman E. True briefly took over, and Knapp succeeded him from October 1942 to May 1943, but True again commanded the battalion when it deployed in November 1943 to Tarawa Atoll in the Gilbert Islands. True remained in command when the unit was redesignated the 2d Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion on 16 April 1944. The organization subsequently served in Hawaii and Guam before land-



National Archives Photo 127-N-62097

The Sperry 60-inch searchlight was employed by the 3d Defense Battalion both to illuminate incoming enemy aircraft and to spot approaching surface vessels.

ing on Okinawa in April 1945. It returned to the United States in 1946 and was deactivated.

3d Defense Battalion (October 1939-June 1944)

Activated at Parris Island, South Carolina, with Lieutenant Colonel Robert H. Pepper in command, the battalion deployed in May 1940 to Hawaii where it became one of the Rainbow Five. Colonel Harry K. Pickett took command in August of that year, and in September approximately a third of the battalion, under Major Harold C. Roberts, went to Midway and assumed responsibility for the antiaircraft defense of the atoll. Lieutenant Colonel Pepper brought the rest of the unit to Midway in 1941, but the battalion returned to Hawaii in October and helped defend Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attacked on 7 December. A detachment of 37mm guns and the 3-inch antiaircraft group joined the 6th Defense Battalion at Midway, opposed the Japanese air attack on 4 June 1942, and shared in a Navy Unit Commendation awarded the 6th Battalion for the defense of that atoll. In August 1942, the battalion, still led by Lieutenant Colonel Pepper, participated in the landings at Guadalcanal and Tulagi in the Solomon Islands. During 1943, the unit experienced a change of commanders, with Harold C. Roberts, now a lieutenant colonel, taking over in March 1943, Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth W. Benner in May, and Lieutenant Colonel Samuel G. Taxis in August. After a stay in New Zealand, the battalion returned

to Guadalcanal in September 1943 and in November of that year, while commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Edward H. Forney, landed at Bougainville, remaining in the northern Solomons until June 1944. Redesignated the 3d Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion on 15 June 1944, the organization was disbanded at Guadalcanal on the last day of that year.

Marines of the 7th Defense Battalion, one of the "Rainbow Five," give their new M3 Stuart light tank a trial run at Tutuila, American Samoa, in the summer of 1942.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 54082



4th Defense Battalion (February 1940-May 1944)

The organization took shape at Parris Island, South Carolina, under Major George F. Good, Jr.; Colonel Lloyd L. Leech took over in April; and Lieutenant Colonel Jesse L. Perkins in December 1940. Colonel William H. Rupertus commanded the unit when it deployed in February 1941 to defend the naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Under Colonel Harold S. Fasset, the battalion arrived in the Pacific in time to become one of the Rainbow Five. Its strength was divided between Pearl Harbor and Midway, and helped defend both bases against Japanese attacks on 7 December. The unit deployed in March 1942 to Efate and Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides. It moved in July 1943 to New Zealand and then to Guadalcanal before landing in August 1943 at Vella Lavella in support of the I Marine Amphibious Corps. After becoming the 4th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion on 15 May 1944, the unit returned to Guadalcanal in June but ended the war on Okinawa, arriving there in April 1945.

5th Defense Battalion (December 1940-April 1944)

Organized at Parris Island, South Carolina, under Colonel Lloyd L. Leech, the 5th Defense Battalion subsequently became the 14th Defense Battalion, thus earning the un-

official title of "Five: Fourteenth." Colonel Leech took the 5th Defense Battalion (minus the 5-inch artillery group) to Iceland with the Marine brigade sent there to relieve the British garrison. He brought the unit back to the United States in March 1942, and in July it sailed for the South Pacific, where one detachment set up its weapons at Noumea, New Caledonia, and another defended Tulagi in the Solomons after the 1st Marine Division landed there in August 1942. The bulk of the battalion went to the Ellice Islands; there Colonel George F. Good, Jr., assumed command in November, and was relieved in December by Lieutenant Colonel Willis E. Hicks. On 16 January 1943, the part of the unit located at Tulagi was redesignated the 14th Defense Battalion, while the remainder in the Ellice group became the Marine Defense Force, Funafuti. In March 1944, the Marine Defense Force, Funafuti, sailed for Hawaii, where, on 16 April, it became the 5th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion, seeing action under the designation during the latter stages of the Okinawa campaign.

6th Defense Battalion (March 1941-February 1946)

Lieutenant Colonel Charles I. Murray formed the battalion at San Diego, California, but turned it over to Colonel Raphael Griffin, who took it to Hawaii in July 1941. It relieved the 3d Defense Battalion at Midway in September. In June 1942, the 6th, now commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Harold D. Shannon, helped fight off a Japanese air attack and repair bomb damage, thus earning a Navy Unit Commendation. The battalion remained at Midway until redesignated Marine Barracks, Naval Base, Midway, on 1 February 1946. The wartime commanders who succeeded Shannon were Lieutenant Colonels Lewis A. Hohn, Rupert R. Deese, John H. Griebel, Charles T. Tingle, Frank P. Hager, Jr., Robert L. McKee, Herbert R. Nusbaum, and Wilfred Weaver, and Major Robert E. Hommel.

7th Defense Battalion (December 1940-April 1944)

Lieutenant Colonel Lester A. Dessez formed the unit at San Diego, California, as a composite battalion of infantry and artillery. In March 1941, he took the outfit to Tutuila, Samoa, as one of the Rainbow Five. The 7th later deployed to Upolu and established a detachment at Savaii. Colonel Curtis W. LeGette took command in December 1942, and in August of the following year, the battalion moved to Nanoumea in the Ellice Islands in preparation for supporting operations against the Gilbert Islands. Lieutenant Colonel Henry R. Paige took over in December 1943 and brought the unit to



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 56812
This Browning M2 watercooled anti-aircraft machine gun, operated by 9th Defense Battalion Marines, shot down the first attacking Japanese aircraft at Rendova.

Hawaii where, on 16 April 1944, it became the 7th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion. As an antiaircraft outfit, it deployed to Anguar, Palau Islands, in September 1944, where it served in the garrison force for the remainder of the war.

8th Defense Battalion (April 1942-April 1944)

Lieutenant Colonel Augustus W. Cockrell raised this battalion from Marine units at Tutuila, Samoa. In May 1942, the battalion deployed to the Wallis Islands, where it was redesignated the Island Defense Force. Lieutenant Colonel Earl A. Sneeringer assumed command for two weeks in August 1943 before turning the unit over to Colonel Clyde H. Hartsel. Colonel Lloyd L. Leech became battalion commander in October 1943, a month before the unit deployed to Apamama in the Gilberts. On 16 April 1944, after moving to Hawaii, the organization became the 8th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion and, as such, took part in the Okinawa campaign, remaining on the island until November 1945 when the unit returned to the United States.

9th Defense Battalion (February 1942-September 1944)

Formed at Parris Island, South Carolina, and known as the "Fighting Ninth," the battalion was first commanded by Major Wallace O. Thompson, who brought it to Cuba where it helped defend the Guantanamo naval base. Lieutenant Colonel Bernard Dubel and his successor, Colonel David R. Nimmer, commanded the battalion while it served in Cuba, and Nimmer remained in command when the unit landed in Novem-

ber 1942 to reinforce the defenses of Guadalcanal. In preparation for further action, the battalion emphasized mobility and artillery support of ground operations at the expense of its coastal defense mission. Lieutenant Colonel William Scheyer commanded the 9th during the fighting in the central Solomons. Here it set up antiaircraft guns and heavy artillery on Rendova to support the fighting on neighboring New Georgia before moving to New Georgia itself and deploying its light tanks and other weapons. The battalion's tanks also supported Army troops on Arundel Island. Lieutenant Colonel Archie E. O'Neil was in command when the unit landed at Guam on D-Day, 21 July 1944. The battalion was awarded the Navy Unit Commendation for its service in action at Guadalcanal, Rendova, New Georgia, and Guam. Redesignated the 9th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion in September 1944, the unit returned to the United States in 1946.

10th Defense Battalion (June 1942-May 1944)

Formed under Colonel Robert Blake at San Diego, California, the unit arrived in the Solomon Islands in February 1943, and participated in the defense of Tulagi in that group and Banika in the Russell Islands. The battalion's light tanks saw action on New Georgia and nearby Arundel Island. Under Lieutenant Colonel Wallace O. Thompson, who assumed command in July 1943, the 10th landed at Eniwetok, Marshall Islands, in February 1944. The unit was redesignated the 10th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion on 7 May 1944.

11th Defense Battalion
(June 1942-May 1944)

This battalion was activated at Parris Island, South Carolina, under Colonel Charles N. Muldrow and deployed during December 1942 to Efate in the New Hebrides. Beginning in January 1943, it helped defend Tulagi in the Solomons and Banika in the Russells group. During the Central Solomons campaign, it fought on Rendova, New Georgia, and Arundel Islands. In August, the entire battalion came together on New Georgia and in March 1944 deployed the short distance to Arundel Island. Redesignated the 11th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion on 16 May 1944, the unit moved in July to Guadalcanal where it was deactivated by year's end.

12th Defense Battalion
(August 1942-June 1944)

Colonel William H. Harrison activated this unit at San Diego, California, and took it to Hawaii in January 1943. After a brief stay in Australia, the 12th landed in June 1943 at Woodlark Island off New Guinea. Next the 12th took part in the assault on Cape Gloucester, New Britain in December 1943. Lieutenant Colonel Merlyn D. Holmes assumed command in February 1944, and on 15 June the defense battalion was redesignated the 12th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion. It moved to the Russell Islands in June and in September to Peleliu, where it remained through 1945.

13th Defense Battalion
(September 1942-April 1944)

Colonel Bernard Dubel formed the battalion at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where it defended the naval base throughout the war. In February 1944, Colonel Richard M. Cutts, Jr., took command. The unit became the 13th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion on 15 April and was disbanded after the war.

14th Defense Battalion
(January 1943-September 1944)

Colonel Galen M. Sturgis organized this battalion from the elements of the 5th Defense Battalion on Tulagi, which inspired the nickname "Five: Fourteenth." Lieutenant Colonel Jesse L. Perkins took command in June 1943, and during his tour of duty, the battalion operated on Tulagi and sent a detachment to Emirau, St. Mathias Islands, to support a landing there in March 1944. Lieutenant Colonel William F. Parks took over from Perkins that same month and in April brought the unit to Guadalcanal to prepare for future operations. The organization

landed at Guam in July and in September became the 14th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion, remaining on the island until after the war had ended.

15th Defense Battalion
(October 1943-May 1944)

Organized in Hawaii by Lieutenant Colonel Francis B. Loomis, Jr., from the 1st Airdrome Battalion at Pearl Harbor, the unit bore the nickname "First: Fifteenth." Beginning in January 1944, it served at Kwajalein and Majuro Atolls in the Marshalls. Lieutenant Colonel Peter J. Negri assumed command in May 1944, shortly before the unit, on the 7th of that month, became the 15th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion.

16th Defense Battalion
(November 1942-April 1944)

Lieutenant Colonel Richard P. Ross, Jr., formed the unit on Johnston Island from elements of the 1st Defense Battalion that had been stationed there. Lieutenant Colonel Bruce T. Hemphill took over in July 1943 and turned the unit over to Lieutenant Colonel August F. Penzold, Jr., in March of the following year. Redesignated the 16th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion on 19 April 1944, the outfit went to Hawaii by the end of August. It subsequently deployed to Tinian, remaining there until moving to Okinawa in April 1945.

17th Defense Battalion
(March 1944-April 1944)

At Kauai in Hawaii, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas G. McFarland organized this unit from the 2d Airdrome Battalion, which had returned from duty in the Ellice Islands. The redesignation gave rise to the nickname "Two: Seventeen," and the motto "One of a Kind." On 19 April, the defense battalion became the 17th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion. It moved to Saipan in July and to Tinian in August. At the latter island, it provided antiaircraft defense for both Tinian Town and North Field, from which B-29s took off with the atomic bombs that leveled Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

18th Defense Battalion
(October 1943-April 1944)

Activated at New River, North Carolina, by Lieutenant Colonel Harold C. Roberts, who was replaced in January 1944 by Lieutenant Colonel William C. Van Ryzin, the unit became the 18th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion on 16 May of that year. By August, echelons of the battalion were located at Saipan and Tinian, but by September it had

come together on the latter island, where it remained until the end of the war.

51st Defense Battalion
(August 1942-January 1946)

Organized at Montford Point Camp, New River, North Carolina, this was the first of two defense battalions commanded by white officers, but organized from among African-American Marines who had trained at Montford Point. Colonel Samuel Woods, Jr., who commanded the Montford Point Camp, formed the battalion and became its first commanding officer. Lieutenant Colonel William B. Onley took over in March 1943 and Lieutenant Colonel Floyd A. Stephenson in April. The initial plan called for the 51st to be a composite unit with infantry and pack-howitzer elements, but in June 1943 it became a conventional defense battalion. Lieutenant Curtis W. LeGette assumed command in January 1944 and took the battalion to Nanoumea and Funafuti in the Ellice Islands, where it arrived by the end of February 1944. In September, the 51st deployed to Eniwetok in the Marshalls where, in December, Lieutenant Colonel Gould P. Groves became battalion commander, a post he would hold throughout the rest of the war. In June 1945, Lieutenant Colonel Groves dispatched a composite group to provide antiaircraft defense for Kwajalein Atoll. The battalion sailed from the Marshalls in November 1945 and disbanded at Montford Point in January 1946.

52d Defense Battalion
(December 1943-May 1946)

This unit, like the 51st, was organized at Montford Point Camp, New River, North Carolina, and manned by African Americans commanded by white officers. Planned as a composite unit, the 52d took shape as a conventional defense battalion. It absorbed the pack howitzer crews made surplus when the 51st lost its composite status and retrained them in the employment of other weapons. Colonel Augustus W. Cockrell organized the unit, which he turned over to Lieutenant Colonel Joseph W. Earnshaw in July 1944. Under Earnshaw, the 52d the unit deployed to the Marshalls, arriving in October to man the antiaircraft defenses of Majuro Atoll and Roi-Namur in Kwajalein Atoll. Lieutenant Colonel David W. Silvey assumed command in January 1945, and between March and May the entire battalion deployed to Guam, remaining there for the rest of the war. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas C. Moore, Jr., replaced Silvey in May 1945, and in November, the 52d relieved the 51st at Kwajalein and Eniwetok Atolls before returning to Montford Point, where in May 1946 it became the 3d Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion (Composite).

Sources

The basic sources for this pamphlet are the five volumes of the *History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II*. Other books that contributed to the narrative include: Jane Blakeny, *Heroes, U.S. Marine Corps, 1861-1955* (Washington: privately printed, 1957); *Antiaircraft Defense* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Military Service Publishing Company, 1940); Robert D. Heinl, Jr., *Soldiers of the Sea* (Annapolis, Maryland: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1962); *Uncommon Valor* (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1946); Ordnance School, *Handbook of Ordnance Material* (Aberdeen, Maryland: Aberdeen Proving Ground, 1944); Patrick O'Sheel and Gene Cook, eds., *Semper Fidelis* (New York: William Sloane, 1947); Robert Sherrod, *History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II* (Washington: Combat Forces Press, 1952); Stanley E. Smith, ed., *The United States Marine Corps in World War II* (New York: Random House, 1969); Carolyn A. Tyson, *A Chronology of the United States Marine Corps, 1935-1946* (Washington: Historical Division, HQMC, 1965); and Charles Updegraph, Jr., *U.S. Marine Corps Special Units of World War II* (Washington: Historical Division, HQMC, 1972).

Available in the archives at the Marine Corps Historical Center is an impressive body of primary source material prepared by individual defense battalions during the Pacific War. Also in the Marine Corps Historical Center are the Oral History and Personal Papers Collections, containing many first-hand accounts of World War II.

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